Making Sense of Husserlian Phenomenological Philosophy in Empirical Research

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Abstract

Phenomenological philosophy is esoteric. Therefore, it is not surprising that most empirical studies adopting a phenomenological approach do not acknowledge or engage with key phenomenological concepts that could shape their investigations. Meanwhile, can we claim that a study is phenomenological when it ignores fundamental phenomenological concepts/theories? A part of the lack of engagement with fundamental phenomenological concepts in empirical research is due to how challenging it is to make sense of these concepts in research. I rely on key concepts from Husserl's phenomenology such as intentionality, natural attitude, lifeworld, pure essence and inter-subjectivity to envisage the application of phenomenological philosophy in empirical research. The concepts provide different perspectives to thinking about, seeing and analysing the world around us. It is hoped that this article makes phenomenological philosophy more accessible for researchers to apply in their investigations. With dedicated study, these concepts can be useful in different stages of the research process.

Keywords

phenomenology, qualitative research, husserl, empirical research, phenomenological philosophy

Introduction

There seems to be a lack of understanding, or perhaps disinterest, among researchers in the application of phenomenological philosophy in their investigations. Reading the "Research design" or "Methodology" sections of most published papers using phenomenology will show the absence of core phenomenological principles. I have erred in this myself. In one of my publications adapting phenomenology, we wrote, "the phenomenological design was used because the researchers were interested in the subjective views and experiences of the research participants" (Manful et al., 2020, p. 276). However, the statement does not make any clear connection to fundamental phenomenological principles, neither does it align itself with existing phenomenological methodologies that are developed. This article aims to address a fundamental problem where researchers tend to ignore basic phenomenological logic that can inform their investigation. The objective is achieved by looking to some fundamental concepts from Husserl and examining how we can make sense of phenomenological philosophy in empirical research.

Within these concepts, I make use of examples from my study with children whose parents have a mental illness to help readers better envisage how the concepts can be applied in practice.

Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy with the purpose of describing and analysing phenomena, as in the way things appear (Husserl, 1983; 2012). Phenomenological concepts and theories have been adapted to develop qualitative research methodologies in the past two decades. Examples of these include Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), descriptive phenomenological psychology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) and hermeneutic phenomenology

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(van Manen, 2016). These methodologies often cite phenomenological philosophy as their inspiration. For example, in the IPA book by Smith et al. (2009), they devote parts of the second chapter of their book to works by four phenomenological philosophers; Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Therefore, these methodologies are developed with the assumption that they are being influenced by phenomenological philosophy.

There are debates about whether the existing phenomenological methodologies adhere to some basic tenets of phenomenology. Giorgi (2010), for instance, has argued that IPA is better off classified as "Interpretive Experiential Analysis" because the method has no relation to the philosophy of phenomenology. This claim has been unequivocally supported by Gyollai (2020), arguing that the study of lived experiences is not all that phenomenology is about. IPA has been classified as being experiential because it is often associated with studying the psychological components of human experience (Smith, 2017), rather than an investigation of the phenomenon. Indeed, Zahavi (2019a) has asserted that an interest in subjective experiences and sense making is not necessarily phenomenological but something shared by many qualitative researchers.

Zahavi (2019a) also criticises Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, arguing that the outcome of the methodology is a first-person description or analysis of lived experience. Undoubtedly, there are questions about how to conduct a phenomenological investigation while adhering to some key fundamental principles that make the inquiry qualify as phenomenological. Of course, this is not an easy task. There are calls to consider abandoning phenomenological philosophy within empirical research (Paley, 2016; Zahavi & Martiny, 2019). Meanwhile, it is also undeniable that a good understanding of phenomenological philosophy can provide researchers with an enhanced understanding of their subject in ways that may not be possible when the fundamentals are ignored. I make use of phenomenological concepts like lifeworld, intentionality, natural attitude, pure essence and inter-subjectivity to help researchers think about making sense of phenomenological philosophy within empirical research. Within these discussions, I make use of my research with children whose parents have mental illness to make the connection between phenomenology and empirical research.

The concepts are key to Husserl's transcendental project. In order to make clear the nature of reality and challenge assumptions about the positive sciences, it was important for Husserl to engage with these concepts (Zahavi, 2003). Although the concept of intentionality appeared earlier in Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (Husserl, 2000), it yet shows a connection between a subject and an object which emphasises an individual's role in the constitution of knowledge. An understanding of this active role is what even makes things like the natural attitude, pure essence and inter-subjectivity plausible or conceivable. For instance, if we cannot think about the things we see, we cannot even imagine in the first place that those thoughts are taken-for-granted, which takes us to the natural attitude. These concepts are explored in further detail in the article.

Some discussions have already been made about how phenomenological research can be carried out in practice (Finlay, 2009, 2011; Giorgi, 2008). For example, Finlay (2009) draws on Giorgi's phenomenological method as encompassing phenomenological reduction, description and search for essences as well as IPA's detailed description of lived experiences, without the use of reduction. However, not many of these offer explanations in a research context that researchers can draw on for their work. Also, it is often that the studies combine different phenomenological strands which may leave novice researchers confused on what path to take. This article mostly draws on Husserl's contributions to phenomenology as well as offering insights into how the phenomenological concepts can be used in empirical research.

Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology: A Brief Note

Husserl is credited for defining phenomenology in the 20th century although it originated in philosophy over centuries. Husserl started out as a mathematician, with mathematics as the object of study and then moved to other phenomena. He was interested in both objective and subjective experiences with his analysis reaching a pure phenomenology. Husserl moved away from the external world of object to studying how objects appeared to subjects, and the subjects' contribution to this appearance. Yet, this is not to assume a straightforward distinction between subjects and objects. Husserl's analysis, and as will be revealed shortly, portrays a more fluid subject-object relationship, rather than a divide. The "bracketing" of the external world constituted "phenomenological reduction." In Husserl's analysis, the concept of bracketing which we are now used to, albeit fraught with misapplications, is best thought of as coming from his notion of the epoché. It is through the epoché that we do away with our *taken-for-grantedness*, not necessarily doing away with preconceptions or assumptions as is commonly (mis) understood. Initially, Husserl had given an indication that the process of bracketing involves a simple doing away with preconceptions. However, in his book *Crisis* he later emphasises the relationship between the person and the world where experience occurs. This shift may be seen as an attempt to rectify the stance that the epoché involves doing away with preconceptions. In this compelling statement, he argues that we do not lose our preconceptions in the application of the epoché:

> *"In the reorientation of the* epoché *nothing is lost, none of the interests and ends of the world-life, and thus also none of the ends of knowledge. But for all these things their essential subjective correlates are exhibited, and thus the true and full ontic meaning of objective being, and that of all objective truth, is set forth"* (Husserl, 1970, p.176, p.176)

It was at this point that Husserl gave considerable attention to the study of the essential structures of a phenomenon (Husserl, 1983), which was already even present in his *Logical Investigations*. A systematic study of the lifeworld could make it possible to reach a transcendental phenomenology. Within empirical research, transcendental phenomenology could be thought of as the universal essence of the phenomenon being investigated. This article puts together key concepts that makes Husserl's transcendental project possible. In addition, the article aims to clarify these concepts within empirical research so that researchers will know how to use them in practice.

Is Phenomenological Philosophy applicable to Empirical Research?

The aims of phenomenological qualitative research and phenomenological philosophy are different. Zahavi (2019b) asks whether the former can be considered as phenomenological if it ignores or misinterprets the latter. It appears to be the case that phenomenological qualitative research cannot or even should not qualify as "phenomenological" if it ignores the theoretical frameworks of phenomenological philosophy. Indeed, empirical research has its own principles, practices and traditions. Scientific research is conducted in a way which may be connected with some philosophical foundations (Giorgi, 2010). Yet, scientific research seeks empiricism and the philosophy of phenomenology focuses on a different domain which does not meet the expectations of scientific research. It will mean practising philosophy if one is to strictly follow the phenomenological methods outlined by Husserl, 1983. Meanwhile, a straightforward response to the question whether phenomenological philosophy is applicable to empirical research is, YES! While, in this section, I look at why this is the case, I also explore the intricacies that makes this project challenging.

First, the application of phenomenological principles in empirical research distinguishes itself from other investigations which are not phenomenological. For instance, Husserl's idea of a general structure that can be attained through concepts like inter-subjectivity and imaginative variation, provides a unique perspective to an investigation which is only possible through an engagement with phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). For Husserl, the essence of a phenomenon represents its true nature. The focus here is on engaging with the person's lived experience to draw attention to the universal essence of the phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Secondly, MacLeod (1947) gave a hint that developments in phenomenological philosophy would invariably shape how phenomenology is applied to psychological research. Within psychology, a phenomenological method is "the systematic attempt to observe and describe in all its essential characteristics the world of phenomena as it is presented to us" (MacLeod, 1947, p. 194). It is, therefore, appropriate to ensure that phenomenological philosophy is clearly understood and utilised in a manner that offers distinctive outcomes.

The supposed mismatch between the application of phenomenological philosophy to empirical research has, in part, led to the development of many phenomenological methodologies (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). It is important for researchers to be aware of fundamental phenomenological theories to use as a framework in their investigations. Knowledge of these theories can also help them make informed decisions regarding ongoing misunderstandings or misapplication of phenomenological logic. Inconsistencies exist about the ways in which the language of phenomenological philosophy can be translated into applied phenomenology. Giorgi (2010) contends that the scientific methods and practices for science based on phenomenology have not yet been formally established. This is true as phenomenology is not a monolithic thinking but rather a movement with many thinkers (Moran, 2000; Spiegelberg, 2013) with continuous and evolving debates about many of the concepts. This article is part of the movement, making efforts to enable readers to grasp key phenomenological concepts from Husserl which researchers can ponder to make sense of their phenomenological inquiry.

With the ongoing debates about whether or not philosophy has relevance for empirical research, it is more of a question about how philosophy can be used in scientific research (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020a; Zahavi, 2019b). Rightfully so, phenomenological philosophy does not offer a set of instructions that researchers can methodologically follow for a particular study. Yet, some fundamental principles of phenomenology enable us to see or understand the world in a way that can be conceivable and meaningful as in empirical research. Hence the critical question of how these concepts can be useful to empirical research. Elsewhere, Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2020b) proposed the philosophical art of questioning as a key activity to empirical research. The art of questioning is not only relevant for empirical research but even applies to our daily life. According to Merleau-Ponty (1968), phenomenology is the philosophy that develops the art of questioning. He notes that, in order to be radical, we need to acknowledge the existence of the world around us to engage in questioning it. We cannot know what we are doubting if we do not know about that which we are doubting. Merleau-Ponty states that questioning encompasses both knowing and asking at the same time. By arguing this way, he makes a statement that philosophy does not only contribute to knowledge but questions its foundations. Hence, we see here that philosophy is inseparable from empirical science because of its inherent questioning attitude (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; 1968).

Phenomenological philosophy has a place in empirical research albeit some form of caution may be warranted. It is reasonable to argue that philosophy cannot be neatly applied to empirical research, thus, its use should be limited, or even abandoned (Paley, 2016). However, what we have seen in a change in attitude from a non-questioning one to a questioning

attitude taken by a researcher is an effortless endeavour required for all scientific activities. The onus lies on researchers to make good use of the phenomenological literature, understanding how their research could benefit from a better awareness of fundamental phenomenological principles. What follows next is a description of some key phenomenological concepts from Husserl which hopes to contribute to further discussions about how researchers could improve upon their phenomenological foundation.

Lifeworld

Husserl gives a detailed account of his conceptualisation of the lifeworld in *Crisis*. The lifeworld is the prescientific world of experience. It is the pre-theoretical, practical world of everyday experience which also captures how we construct a shared world with collective meaning (Husserl, 1970). At times, Husserl refers to the lifeworld as "the world of immediate experience" indicating that it encapsulates our ordinary day-to-day activities/customs. While the lifeworld is a source of significant meaning it is somehow forgotten, taken for granted. The lifeworld underscores the fact that all forms of judgements including scientific investigations come from ordinary experience. Husserl (1970, p.51) summarises this as follows, "All life rests upon prediction or, as we can say, upon induction…any straightforward experience is inductive". Therefore, our knowledge of the world, including scientific knowledge, will not be possible without the lifeworld. According to Zahavi (2003), Husserl's analysis of the lifeworld reveals three key contemplations. First, analysis of the lifeworld clarifies the relation between scientific theory and pre-scientific experience, which questions objectivism and scientism that exists today. Second, the analysis of lifeworld can be thought of as part of the processes that leads to transcendental phenomenological reduction. Finally, the lifeworld can also be considered within the framework of Husserl's analysis of inter-subjectivity.

Husserl criticised the fact that science positions itself as the only mechanism for describing reality as it is in itself. Here, science is used to refer to the natural sciences like physics, chemistry and mathematics. Husserl criticised objectivism through the lifeworld, arguing that while it makes up the fundamental source of scientific knowledge, it has been forgotten. The lifeworld is a world situated with varying truths but science wants objective knowledge from subjective first-person perspective. Objects in the lifeworld are defined by their perspective giveness, their approximation (so, when a child sees living with parental mental illness as tedious, another child may see it as a learning experience; the first child's perspective of living with parental mental illness is not exactly the same as the second). On the contrary, the objects of science are seen as irrelative, exact, non-perspectival (Husserl, 1983). Science does not seek to know how the world shows up for us, but how it is "in itself", that is mind-independently. Husserl does not imply that scientific exploration of reality is false.

But, he criticises objectivism in the attempt to define reality as completely independent from subjectivity, interpretation and historical community.

Husserl's reference to interpretation and historicity as part of the analysis of phenomena brings attention to the confusion that currently persists as a result of the so-called distinction between descriptive and interpretative phenomenology. Husserl's philosophy does not conceive of "description" in lay terms as is being considered today (see Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2020b) where they engage in some interesting discussions about the unnecessary distinction between description and interpretation). Returning to the issue with objectivism, Husserl argues that science does not give as a description of reality from nowhere. The lifeworld which is intuitively given to us will remain a reference point for scientific exploration and the foundation of meaning (Husserl, 1983; 2012). Zahavi (2003) posits that to know exactly what the lifeworld is, is an impossible task. Ontologically speaking, the lifeworld refers to the pre-scientific world of experience, the one which we are familiar with and take for granted. At some points, however, Husserl argues that the lifeworld gradually absorbs scientific theories. Gradually, theoretical understandings come to define the way we do things in everyday life (Husserl, 1983; Zahavi, 2003). A simple example is using theories like ecological theory or attachment theories to explain how a child relates a parent with mental illness.

The lifeworld of children whose parents have mental illness encapsulates their everyday activities in relation to living with parental mental illness. Following from Zahavi's (2018) definition of the lifeworld as the world we live in, then, it is about these children's daily lives. It can range from the children's interactions with their parents, peer relations, interactions with the school setting or relationships with professionals. Phenomenological inquiries will not be possible without the existence of the lifeworld. The children's lifeworld gives us something to investigate, whether coming from their perception or daily concerns, this is the only real world. These varied experiences, irrespective of how they are perceived, comes from the children who own the experience. Considering that the children's experiences come from a world that already exists, there is the tendency that their sharing of the lifeworld may be uncritical. That is why it is important to stress that the lifeworld is not a final product but requires analysis and exploration to clarify the phenomenon of experience.

The phenomenon of the lifeworld is generally vague and inexact. Although the lifeworld has a perspectival and relative structure (because people may perceive things differently), Husserl argues that it contains a basic invariant morphological structure. Considering the perceptual world that we live in, objects that we are surrounded by like birds, trees, utensils or tables are, by nature, characterised by inherent vagueness, our explications of these are an approximation. But the lifeworld is not necessarily in disorder, if that was the case, it would be impossible to develop systematic theories that explain human behaviour. The implication is that there is a universal, essential

structure to every possible lifeworld, albeit how dissimilar it may be, whether culturally, geographically or historically. Therefore, we consider the lifeworld of children living with parental mental illness as characterised by a certain universal essence which is invariant. By initially indicating that scientific theories are generated from the lifeworld as the basis for analysis, Husserl shows that both lifeworld and science are constituted by (inter)subjectivity. Because of this, objectivism and scientism must be rejected. Indeed, the lifeworld is constituted by inter-subjective perspectives that give a coherent and universal meaning to the phenomenon.

Intentionality

According to Husserl, to be phenomenological, we need to be conscious of something. Consciousness is not of itself but of something (Husserl, 2000). As Zahavi (2018) puts it, when we see, remember, feel, fear, hear or think, our seeing, remembering and feeling is about something. This is what Husserl called *intentionality*. Intentionality is always perspectival as we perceive things in a particular way. The immediate object we perceive only constitutes a small portion of what we can be conscious of (Husserl, 2000). Without doubt, this leads us to thinking that an object can be explored in many different ways. For example, a phone can be seen as a means of communication, a way of keeping time or something of a distraction. These different perspectives of the object can be based on prior experiences, culture or history. As a result of this, phenomenologists reject the argument that experiences are subjective occurrences with no bearing on the outside world. This further gives emphasis to Husserl's description of the relationship between human beings and the world (Husserl, 1970).

The concept of intentionality could lead us to explore the *perspectival* nature of living with parental mental illness. In the context of children whose parents have mental illness, the way a child talks about living with a parent with mental illness may be due to the child's prior interactions with others. The child's view of the world may influence their interactions with the parent with mental illness. This is similar to the perceptual nature of phenomenology and the different ways through which a particular event or activity may be perceived (Zahavi, 2003; 2018). Therefore, in the analysis of children's experiences of parental mental illness, it is important to also consider where their perspective is coming from. For instance, in my study, I found that some children often enjoyed periods away from home due to the abuse they get when at home. While for others, being away from the parent can be worrying as they think about how their parent would fare when they become symptomatic. In this way, intentionality enables us to explore why/how consciousness is directed differently towards an object (Krueger, 2019).

Franz Brentano, who taught Husserl, initially introduced the concept of intentionality. Brentano's idea was in relation to developing a "descriptive psychology" where he thought of intentionality as characterised by only mental phenomena.

Brentano was focused on the mental processes involved as the mind is directed towards an object:

> *Every mental phenomena includes something as an object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on* (Brentano, 1995, p. 68).

Therefore, for Brentano, conscious acts are not independent but are constituted in relation to another object. Therefore, the ontology of consciousness can only be understood by investigating the different relations between conscious acts and the intended relational objects. Consciousness is therefore a relational phenomenon. Brentano's idea is part of what influenced later phenomenologists to conceptualise the world as manifested through relationships. The idea of establishing a relation between conscious acts and intentional objects may seem basic now but it was provocative at the time. Krueger (2019) argues that exploring conscious acts as a relation to an intentional object enables us to distinguish between distinct states. For example, let's take a particular activity in focus – a parent with mental illness being abusive, can be an object an individual is intentional towards through numerous acts showing in consciousness. A child may *perceive* the parent as not loving, the same child may *believe* the parent is being abusive because something is wrong, and when the parent starts to provide food for the child, the same child may *think* the parent is showing warmth and care. This is important because it shows the nature and character of the multiple ways an object can show up in our consciousness. Intentionality serves as the mechanism that allows conscious acts to be directed differently to an intentional object.

Phenomenologists now go beyond intentionality as only mental acts to argue that it is embodied. *Embodied intentionality* insists that our thinking about things and the way we experience them show parts of our physical structure including the things our bodies can do (Zahavi & Gallagher, 2008). The notion of embodiment may not be related to a study of children living with parental mental illness per se. It could help to investigate how people with disabilities, for example, negotiate access to physical structures. Also, it is not just about our thoughts, but also the feelings we feel. Affective phenomena like mood and emotions contribute significantly to how things in the world and the people around present to us. The way we feel is an important aspect of how we are intentional about objects. So, it is not only about the mental character of intentionality but also affective and embodied dimensions (Slaby & Stephan, 2008). If a child with parental mental illness receives affective supports in terms of encouragements from significant others, they are less likely to be worried about their parent's condition. So, this is one way that such affective phenomenon can shape the way children are intentional towards their parent's mental illness.

Natural Attitude

In the analysis of the natural attitude, Husserl (1983, p.51) opens with a remark that "we begin our considerations as human beings who are living naturally, objectivating, judging, feeling, willing 'in the natural attitude'". Things exist in the world whether they are perceived by a person or not. The natural attitude is a giveness prior to any theory (Husserl, 1983). Hence, it stays "natural" until the subject critically engages with it. The existence of this external reality is what Husserl termed as the *natural attitude*. It is *natural* because we are unaware of this attitude; it is an unreflective moment in time (Luft, 1998). Dreyfus (1984) used an analogy of opening a door to describe the natural attitude. One simply presses the door to let it open. There is no conscious thought into how or why it works that way. The natural attitude consists of naiveté of experience or common sense everyday reality which we live by, one which is accepted straightforward without question (Christensen et al., 2017). The natural attitude is not always the absolute truth but constitute doxic beliefs that frame our understanding of reality (Luft, 1998). What these doxai beliefs lead to is in our taken for grantedness or casualness about the consciousness of our experience. This culminates into Husserl's description of the "General Thesis of the Natural Attitude" which simply connotes the idea that the world is or the world exists, it is always there in reality (Dahlberg et al., 2008). However natural this may seem, the world should not be taken for granted but investigated thoroughly.

The natural attitude is the non-questioning mode of our existence, seeing things as being there without any thought for why or how they are, they are simple facts. Empirical research is started from our position in the world. We are already "at home" and "part of it" in the sense that we know the world. The world is shaped by our assumptions, our dealings with it, involvements and expectations. Doubting the existence of the world means taking things for granted. Merleau-Ponty's view of questioning the world is part of an acknowledgement of our involvement with it and an extension on the Husserlian phenomenological attitude needed for this to occur (Husserl, 1970). Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2020a) state that this naïve attitude is usually not a problem. They argue on the contrary, for example, if we are to continually question how or why things in our daily lives exist like questioning how stairs exist, we might not be able to climb it. However, it becomes an issue when the same naivety is applied to empirical research.

The question is how to be able to do away with our natural tendencies to take things for granted. Husserl's response is that attention should be paid to the *giveness* or *appearance* of reality by focusing on how reality appears to us in the way it is experienced (Zahavi, 2003). The use of imaginative variation (explained under pure essence) is one key way to question the taken-for-grantedness.

Bringing this to empirical research, it is important to identify what may be taken-for-granted within the area of research. This can be drawn from a number of sources and at different stages such as interviews, secondary data, literature review, data collection and data analysis. In my review of literature on peer interventions for children living with parental mental illness, I found that all of such interventions only included peers in a similar situation. It seems to be taken-for-granted that outcomes from such interventions could be transferrable to the children's interactions in natural settings with peers in the general population. However, this is a mistaken point of view which adapting a phenomenological attitude helps to unravel. Questioning the natural attitude makes sure that things are not taken for granted. Here, the peer interventions for children in a similar situation have been continuously designed in a way that makes it common, acceptable, as the "order of the day". However, adopting a phenomenological attitude made me realise that these interventions continued because of our immersion with the world, the world that already is and has meaning in itself. The responsibility here is for the researcher to take a step back and question these taken-for-grantedness.

Pure Essence

Part of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is to be able to show the phenomenon's essence, that which makes the phenomenon what it is (Husserl, 1983). The essence reveals the key structure of the phenomenon without which it would not be that phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006). For instance, there are essential features of a desktop that distinguishes it from a TV. There are those properties of a desktop that makes it a desktop, not a TV. However, with phenomenological research, essences are not as exact as in the analysis of inanimate objects. Because of our involvements in the world and our own active role in the constitution of phenomenon, essences are infinite, always becoming. Yet, knowing that objective reality is inter-subjectively created, the phenomenon's general structure is able to provide us with a perspective of the phenomenon that is commonly shared with the population we are investigating.

Husserl (1983) argues that it is the essences which enable us know what something is in order to interpret it. I cannot say I see a desktop without grasping its essence, that which makes it a desktop, not a TV. Thus, when we see something and describe its qualities, we are invariably talking about their essence. In fact, Merleau-Ponty (1962) contends that phenomenology is the study of essences. Undoubtedly, it is the crux of phenomenology to reveal a phenomenon's essential features. Moreover, essences are already part of the world out there, we are able to talk about or describe things in the world because of their essences (Dahlberg, 2006). Therefore, they are not something strange that the researcher has to find, they are revealed to the researcher as part of the intentional relation between object and subject. In-depth description and analysis of the phenomenon is required for multiple variations of essences to be found.

Husserl et al. (1973) talks about how the phenomenon in focus becomes a "guiding model" for fluid and infinite variations. It is why imaginative variation is crucial to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. The imaginative variation is performed by taking what is given to us, then using our imagination to conduct analysis of it. Zahavi (2018, p. 45) states that by imagining a phenomenon being different from what it is, "we can slowly strip away its accidental properties, and thereby reach certain properties or features that cannot be changed without the object of investigation thereby also ceasing to be the kind of object it is". Throughout a research investigation, particularly at interviewing and data analysis stage, researchers can use their experience of the phenomenon (through literature, personal experience, etc.) to ask imaginative questions of the data. For instance, in my study, I found out from the children what they would think of their lives if they lived with a parent without mental illness. I was also aware from the literature that most of these children keep information about their parent's mental illness a secret away from school. So, I asked the children how their life at school would be if their peers and teachers knew about their parent's mental illness. I asked these questions based on what the children initially gave me about their experiences with living with parental mental illness as well as my knowledge of the literature. Attention here should not be focused on how different the phenomenon compares to another (like living with a parent without mental illness). However, by getting to know how the "original phenomenon" differs from another, we arrive at the unique features of that phenomenon. Turley et al. (2016) use imaginative variation in a similar way by asking varying questions of participants engaged in kink to attain detailed experiential accounts into different sexual practices/preferences.

Essences are open, infinite and fluid. While Husserl (1983) refers to universal essences, he was also aware that nothing possesses individuality in itself. So, essences can never be completely described but are open to change. A similar principle works in an empirical study. In my study about children living with parental mental illness, the essential features I present about the phenomenon living with parental mental illness is not an exact essence but approximative. Essences can be considered as characteristics of something, the make-up "that thing". So when I talk about the essences of living with parental mental illness, I refer to the features that make-up what it is like to live with a parent with mental illness. In a recent publication (see Cudjoe et al., 2022), I show the essential features of what it is for children in the family setting to live with parental mental illness. Readers who wish to find out how the essential features of a phenomenon could be written up as well as the analytic procedures that produce the essences could refer to the publication. Similar work in revealing the essential features of a phenomenon has been presented by Bremer et al. (2009) and Hörberg et al. (2012). The purpose of examining the essence in this article is to make sense of how it connects to or shows itself within empirical research.

(Transcendental) Inter-Subjectivity

Husserl devoted significant parts of his work to the analysis of inter-subjectivity. This is understandable because only a consideration of inter-subjectivity opens the way to perceive the possibilities for transcendental phenomenology (Zahavi, 2003; 2018). However, inter-subjectivity imposes some challenges when considered within the scope of empirical research. If phenomenology is to study how the world presents itself to me, how is it possible to show giveness to another subject? Therefore, we are confronted with some issues to deal with; how do we transcend the giveness for me to be shared with others? In practical terms, it is concerned with how people come to have a similar perspective about a phenomenon. It is complicated with empirical research because it is usually not from a first-person but a third person perspective. I study the phenomenon from the perspective of the children living with parental mental illness, not my own. However, it is possible to provide some answers once we assume that inter-subjectivity deals with how a child's perspective of living with parental mental illness can be shared with others in a similar situation. Thereby, attaining a kind of transcendental inter-subjectivity. In response to the question, Husserl argues that perception presents us with an inter-subjectively accessible being. That is, being that does not exist for me alone but others too. Objects and events of the world are experienced as public, not private, which gives us a transcendental inter-subjectivity. This implies that there is a level of sameness to the children's perception of living with parental mental illness because their experiences are shared.

The constitution of objective reality is an important task of transcendental phenomenology and inter-subjectivity is key to achieving this (Husserl, 1983). "Inter" (subjectivity) is how we experience or empathise with other subjects. It is therefore difficult to conceive of inter-subjectivity from a third-person perspective such as in empirical studies. Inter-subjectivity is more amenable through first-person perspective. However, I use Husserl's notion of "empathy" to deal with this difficulty. Empathy presupposes a similarity between a foreign embodied subject and another subject (Husserl, 1970). If one individual is not an embodied subject, they will not be able to recognise other embodied subjects. A child who lives with a parent with mental illness shares a similar empathy with another child in similar situation. As a result of this, it is possible to conduct an analysis to arrive at a commonly shared experience among children whose parents have mental illness. In fact, the experiences of one's own as well as others, constitutes the foundation for all experiences. However, the fact that other people live with a parent with mental illness does not mean they experience the Other as the Other experiences themselves. Essentially, while the Other lives in a similar situation, the experience of that situation may not be the same nor will the consciousness of the Other be accessible in the same way. But this is not a problem because the foreign subject eludes the direct experience of other subjects. If we are

able to access the consciousness of the Other, the Other would have ceased being and become our own. Husserl indicates that we actually experience the Other but not as an intentional object. It is why I found in my study that experiences of living with parental mental illness within the children's interviews seem to mirror others' experiences. There is a subject-subject relation where the Other is experienced in its inaccessibility.

The concept of inter-subjectivity is not only limited to the children but also how professionals interact or work with them. This can be explored by looking at how social workers can be responsive to the needs of children whose parents have mental illness. Here, the use of phenomenology may not only be limited to the methodology but also how services can be provided to improve the children's wellbeing. Husserl's notion of empathy underscores the possibility for social workers to understand the needs of these children and deal with them appropriately. Although the social worker may not have a similar experience of living with parental mental illness as the child, developing their awareness into the needs of the children can help them to provide early intervention. Often, social workers interact with these children after abuse or neglect has occurred. If social workers empathise with these children and understand the risks of living with parental mental illness, their efforts in community outreaches may be intensified to provide timely support for these children. When this happens, the children and their families are likely to reach for professional support earlier and not when abuse or neglect has occurred.

Conclusion

Philosophical concepts like intentionality, natural attitude, lifeworld and inter-subjectivity are not recipes ready to be applied within a particular phenomenological approach but they are better thought of as a way of thinking about, seeing and analysing the world around us. Of course, with dedicated study, these concepts can be useful in different stages of the research process like defining a topic, data collection and analysis. As researchers, we have the power to make meaningful contributions to knowledge by not taking the fundamentals of phenomenology for granted. Several phenomenologists like Giorgi (2010), Zahavi (2018) and Finlay (2009) have called for the need for clear explanations of the philosophical concepts when they are applied to empirical research. Giorgi (2010) even goes further to state that reasonable modifications should also be clearly stated considering the fact that philosophy cannot be directly transferred to empirical research. However, the prevailing practice has been the lack of acknowledgement of or engagement with fundamental phenomenological principles in empirical research. It is not clear why this is so, whether it is because of the radical and complex nature of philosophy or to avoid the risk of "hyper-philosophizing". Going forward, and as this article contributes to, researchers should familiarise themselves with core phenomenological theories/concepts to carry out meaningful empirical investigations that do not ignore phenomenological philosophy.

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