



What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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Methodological thoughts: Phenomenology

Awoniyi Stephen^{a*}

^a Texas State University

*Corresponding author e-mail: sa11@txstate.edu

Abstract: In this paper, we take up the subject of (the complex task of) designing and the intentional march towards resolution of the design problem. There is an exploration which takes a designer to a design solution. One of the paths to that end passes through design research and insights that it provides. We examine the case of phenomenology as a research method and part of the process of *coming-to* of a design solution. Phenomenology necessarily considers the question of human experience (including the role of "objects of attention" in stimulating experience). We introduce phenomenology. We provide some operational frameworks. We summarize in a four-step rendition of the research process.

Keywords: Design, Phenomenology, Public space, Experience

1. Preamble

Any design activity aimed at human consumption ought to take human experience into account. A system for acknowledging the unseen of human experience is phenomenology. Phenomenology encourages taking the lifeworld of stakeholders into account. The storyline becomes as critical, at least, as technological solutions (Whittemore, 2014).

2. What, phenomenology?¹

Phenomenology as a method introduces or employs certain useful values and operations. Other research methods do too, each in its own way. Here, we present a few of the values associated with phenomenology.

- Accentuation of human experience: Particularly for designers of products created for human consumption, experience is key. In phenomenology, "chunks" of experience are interrogated for meaning that might be focal (and beneficial) for the consumer. It is important to note that this bounding into meaning units is an analysis strategy only. Holism of experience is important.
- Reduction: Effort to manage (identify, keep at "arm's length") a researcher's possible presumptions (prior knowledge, bias, presuppositions, etc.) is given a deliberate and prominent space. Reduction is discussed below.

¹ Subtitle is intentional.

- If descriptive phenomenology, a probe (vital action) for essence: A research goal is to reach the heart of a phenomenon. Descriptive phenomenology proposes search for essence as a vital goal (to the extent that the researcher is able to arrive/succeed at it). Pursuit of essence is discussed below.
- If descriptive phenomenology, imaginative variation as a strategy: In pursuit of essence, imaginative variation is one strategy that might be applied. Imaginative variation is described below.
- Maximum variation sampling: Variability is a central and compelling driver in research. A researcher (quantitative or qualitative) is often preoccupied with explication of it. While maximum variation sampling is a purposive sampling strategy not applicable in every case, when it is used (e.g. Rangarajan et al., 2022), it might facilitate two ends: (1) lend desired variational range and (2) in some cases, provide opportunity for extreme case analysis (and perhaps even negative case analysis).
- Ultimately, essence (as end/core): One of the strong arguments for descriptive phenomenology is a yearning for essence. Ultimate source of human-directed design information is the individual/consumer's experience/need. Experience is sourced in the person; no design brief exists absent personal experience. Phenomenology can be instrumental in tailoring design to human need.
- We propose that another strong value of phenomenology sources from its intentionality about pursuit of experience. That leads it to take pains to articulate the structure of experience. It is an interesting parallel: Husserl emphasized consciousness (which is what phenomenology wishes to tap into) as intentional (Schmidt, 2020). Now, the same notion of intentionality underlies the researcher's approach: effort to probe the intentional is a deliberately intentional act.

3. Some grounding framework

It is useful to lay down a few principles (rudiments and formulations):

- A researcher might choose to approach phenomenology as a pre-positioning or an ethos.²
- Phenomenology should not be viewed as confirmatory, but exploratory. In fact, one might consider that as placing it in fair company. Confirmation in research is sometimes a staged process. Take, for instance, inferential statistics. It is preceded by descriptive statistics. Another example is with mixed-models research, where phenomenology could (and that is a choice) be operated as part of an exploratory sequential model.
- If phenomenology is not confirmatory, it could be used in complement with other methods (just as, for instance, visual observational research is generally not used alone when confirmation is at stake).
- Phenomenology has come under its own fair share of criticism (see Aravot, 2002, for summary of only a few), but phenomenology is not intended to bestow (and lays no claim to) absolute knowledge. Aravot (2002) framed value of phenomenology in design well: "The contribution of phenomenological investigation is intended to make room for the a-rational (not 'irrational'), the non-discursive and non-

² Although the author had an inkling of this thought, full credit must here be given to a reviewer who articulated this clearly, forthrightly.

representational, not instead of the rational, discursive and representational" (p. 209).

- We suggest that a researcher does not have to always take essence (in descriptive phenomenology) as universal. It could be particular to an individual's experience.

4. Phenomenology: The method

4.1 Brief overview of phenomenology

A useful beginning is to understand a relevant part of the worldview of Edmund Husserl, philosopher, considered to be the founding father of [transcendental] phenomenology (Finlay, 2008; Fleming, 2003; Rapport, 2005; Tuohy et al., 2003). Contrary to the Cartesian point of view which separated mind and body, Husserl saw the "relationship between subject and object as inextricably linked through conscious knowing" (Rapport, 2005, p. 126). While the lifeworld involves bodily experience ("We are always bodily in the world" [Tembo, 2016, p. 2]), mind retains description of that experience. The world is known to people through their thoughts, Husserl argued, and so it is appropriate to attempt to understand their lived experience through "phenomena as they appear through the consciousness" (Koch in Dowling & Cooney, 2012, p. 22-23). It is possible, according to Husserl, to clarify how objects appear to our consciousness (without interpretation) by "bracketing" (keeping out) extraneous thoughts through using "phenomenological reduction" (Rapport, 2005, p. 126). (Bracketing is discussed in the next paragraph.) Husserl's comprehensive method is termed transcendental phenomenology. Its general practiced form is also referred to as descriptive phenomenology. Its aim is to "describe a phenomenon's general characteristics" [Tuohy et al., 2003, p. 18] through direct grasping (or intuiting) of its essential structure as presented to consciousness (Dowling, 2007).

According to Husserl, "all knowledge derived from sources other than what is directly given to consciousness has to be bracketed"--a process also described as *epoché* (Giorgi et al., 2017, p. 178). Bracketing involves "suspension of the researcher's prejudices, preconceptions and beliefs" so that they do not unduly influence how the researcher engages a participant's description of her experience (Dowling & Cooney, 2012, p. 23). A participant's lived experience involves "immediate, pre-reflective consciousness" [Dilthey in Dowling, 2007, p. 132] and Husserl aimed to gain insight into that "lifeworld" of pre-reflective information which has not been subjected to interpretation or conceptualisation (Dowling, 2007, p. 132; van Manen & Adams, 2010).

Himanka (2019) made the argument that, in considering philosophy, thinking and learning, we not only learn by gaining new knowledge, but also by letting go of what we already know. Husserl's *reduction* attempts to create the condition of letting go of past "knowledge" that has potential of conflict with that the researcher is about to begin learning. Husserl's reduction aims to avoid pre-staging how we will receive what we are just now encountering. As Himanka wrote, in drawing a lineage from Plato to Husserl, "both Plato...and Aristotle...saw that philosophy begins in wonder, and Husserl certainly knew and shared this view" (p. 13).

Husserl's reduction is core to descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology. (For a history of Husserl's "aha moment" in coming to a configuration of reduction, see Himanka, 2019). *Epoché* is the first phase of reduction. It is, in ancient usage of the word, the phase of suspension of judgement (see Himanka, 2019, p. 12). Reduction cannot be completed in that one step. To complete it, a "correlation" has to happen.

In completion of reduction, that which appears to one (noema; the outer object) has to be in "correlation" with our perception--or appearance--of it (noesis; the inner subject). Doing phenomenology is achieving that "correlation" (Himanka, 2019, p. 15; also see Schmidt, 2020). "Truth or knowledge [becomes] the correlation between appearance and that which appears" (p. 16).

Reduction is supposed to free us from the natural attitude. Himanka (2019, pp. 15-16) illustrated with Heidegger's example of the Weidenhauser Bridge. I can envisage the bridge (which is known to me) and consider that my image of it is not the bridge itself. That is the natural attitude. My attempt to arrive at truth of the bridge requires that I make both my perception and the object one. If, for instance, we were to place ourselves before the bridge, the bridge itself becomes our envisaging of it. It is that kind of correspondence for which phenomenology aims: reduction as suspension of the natural attitude.

Phenomenological reduction provides an outlook upon "transcendentally purified phenomena," where "purified" means "free from everyday assumptions" (Gill, 2014, p. 120).

Finlay (2008) noted that the phenomenological attitude (or reduction) is considered "one of the more (if not the most) significant dimensions of phenomenological research" (p. 2). In Husserl's reduction, a number of steps are involved, including epoché of the natural sciences, epoché of the natural attitude, transcendental reduction and eidetic reduction (see Finlay, 2008, for details). As for what to bracket, Ashworth (in Finlay, 2008) suggested bracketing three things: (1) scientific theories, (2) declaration of truth or falsity of claims made by participants and (3) the researcher's personal views and experiences.

Fleming et al. (2003) noted that examining one's preunderstandings will enable a researcher to transcend her horizon (i.e. her range of vision) and she will thus be *open* to new insights. As van Manen and Adams (2010) incisively noted, "phenomenology does not just research human experiences and phenomena, it also continually questions the assumptions and presuppositions that prevent us from adequately understanding and expressing in words the living moments of experience" (p. 450).

Husserl's student, philosopher Martin Heidegger, steered away from transcendental phenomenology and journeyed towards an interpretive phenomenology. Heidegger contended that humans make sense of experience through existing (existence) in the world, but also through sharing knowledge and history with others (including through language and speech) (Rapport, 2005). Existence is "set against a background that contextualizes experience" [Gill, 2014, p. 120]. Reflecting Heidegger's claim that experience is already in the world in which we are immersed, Larkin and Thompson (2012) detailed that the individual is "'always already' immersed in a linguistic, relational, cultural and physical world" (p. 102). Thus, there is a historical and shared way by which we know the world. Hans-Georg Gadamer, philosopher and student of Heidegger, extended Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology. For Gadamer, understanding, interpretation and language were to be seen as inseparably linked (Rapport, 2005). What all the foregoing means is that the world is seen in particularly-shaped ways and that is to be taken into account in applying the phenomenological method.

While Husserl prescribed bracketing out (*managing aside*) prior thoughts about a phenomenon, Gadamer advocated embracing them. Our *fore-knowledge* is a useful part of our understanding. In order for a person to understand or interpret a phenomenon, "the interpreter must both overcome the phenomenon's strangeness and transform it into something familiar" and, in the process, unite the "horizon of the historical phenomenon with the interpreter's horizon" (in Rapport, 2005, p. 129). Horizon is a "range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage

point" (Gadamer in Finlay, 2008, p. 9), a "field of vision" from one point of view (Fleming et al., 2003, p. 117). For Gadamer, there is always a vantage point (Finlay, 2008).

Despite debate between descriptive and interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenologists, it is not unreasonable for a designer to consider the stance, where (1) being-in-the-world is seen as an outcome of embodied experience, (2) experience might have irreducible contents, but could also have interpreted dimensions and (3) gaining insight into the essence of those experiences and object qualities or into interpreted dimensions may be useful for arriving at effective solutions.

4.2 Exploring with descriptive phenomenology

This paper directs primary attention at descriptive phenomenology. This is not an indication of preference, as method chosen for a problem should be determined by the problem to be solved. Yet, some qualities about descriptive phenomenology have been indicated above.

As deeply as is feasible, the designer wishes to discover first order insights. Van Manen and Adams (2010) offered an illustration which contains the idea of how we sometimes think we have truth of a phenomenon, but might miss the essence. They wrote: "It is one thing to get lost in a novel but it is another to retrospectively capture what happened to us, just now, as we slipped into this textual space and began to dwell in the story" (p. 450). The latter is what phenomenology attempts to recover for us. The aim of descriptive phenomenology is to arrive at essence; it admits pursuit of *essence* as a direct intention. "There is reduction to the *eidos* or the essence" (Gill, 2014, p. 120). Gill continued, drawing on Husserl: "Essence refers to the a priori, essential structures of subjective experiences or 'that without which an object of a particular kind cannot be thought, i.e. without which the object cannot be intuitively imagined as such'" (p. 120). Search for essence can be pursued through the process of free (imaginative) variation.

According to Todres (2005), there are three central features of descriptive phenomenology:

- Collection of [data on] detailed description of a specific experience
- Adoption of an attitude of phenomenological reduction to facilitate intuiting or arriving at an apprehension of the experience in a form which is not filtered through the researcher/designer's own experience
- Search for the most invariant meanings (essences)body

ON ESSENCE

A designer who wishes to employ phenomenology in her design will often be in pursuit of essences which fundamentally constitute or pertain to the problem to be solved. In Husserl's conception, essences "refer to invariant structures that can be intuited within an experienced world of meaning" (Todres, 2005, p. 105). Todres further elaborated:

Essences...refer to the qualities that give an experiential phenomenon its distinctiveness and coherence; the qualities that make something what it is as it appears relationally to consciousness. (p. 105)

Essences, concluded Todres, constitute the "whatness" of a phenomenon (p. 111).

IMAGINATIVE VARIATION

A process that phenomenologists use to arrive at essence is imaginative variation. It is a system proposed by Husserl. In imaginative variation, "one systematically varies key dimensions of the concrete phenomenon in order to see what effect the variation has on how the phenomenon appears" (Giorgi et al., 2017, pp. 178-179). The process, wrote Gill (2014), requires "imagining different variations of the phenomenon under study to see what remains as its invariant or essential

aspect without which it would be inconceivable" (p. 120). Giorgi has noted that if "the imaginative elimination of an aspect causes the phenomenon to collapse, then that aspect is essential" (in Gill, 2014, p. 123). The exercise, according to Polkinghorne (in Whittemore, 2014) is to "imaginatively stretch the proposed transformation to the edges until it no longer describes the experience underlying the subject's naive description" (p. 133). One asks the question, "Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon?" (Walker & Avant in Dowling, 2007, p. 133).

It is useful to remember that phenomenology is a way of gaining deeper insight. Its goal is not to generate laws (Todres, 2005). Structures which emerge from data analyses are not explanatory and do not directly stand as a model of a thing "out there," but they facilitate understanding and provide insights (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 111). Objects of experiences should be seen as "presences rather than reality," wrote Finlay (2008, p. 13).

5. Conclusion: Phenomenology and designing

In order to frame rest of the discussion, we will break down the research process into four parts:

1. Point of departure
2. Data collection
3. Data analysis
4. Design decision

5.1 Conception and design

As already intimated above, a prepositioning can occur. One could elect a phenomenological research world-view as a point of departure. Apart from the intentionality which is qualia of the experience being investigated itself, we have proposed an operational, process intentionality which is about making experience the currency of the research probe.

SUB-NOTATIONS: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES, ELABORATIONS

Schmidt (2020) presented an example of how phenomenology can be a useful lens through which to conceive design of space. First, he adopted a term by Edward Relph: geographical experience. It is "the entire realm of feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in which they apprehend themselves in a distinct relationship with their environment" (p. 262). In describing geographical experience, the "'unitary noema with an identical sense' is place," added Schmidt. Place is the "key object of geographical experience" (p. 262). Consciousness of place is appropriate because it is an idea that can be articulated and not some esoteric thesis. As an object of exploration phenomenologically, place is noema which is "presented in and constituted by noesis" (p 262). In like fashion, a designer can structurally access a participant/user noesis through focus on an identified noema (object, idea, etc.).

5.2 Data collection

Data are proxies for objects of interrogation in phenomenology.

SUB-NOTATIONS: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES, ELABORATIONS

Let us continue with Schmidt (2020) as an exemplar. Husserl proposed that noesis is constituted of two parts: a sensual part (e.g. just data such as color, roughness of touch) entangled with an animating, sense-bestowing part through which "mental process [processing] arises from the sensuous" (p. 263). Take experience of a place (key object of geographical experience, as he put it)

as example. In experiencing place, the noetic frame/structure is the body. First, it provides sensual data kinesthetically (e.g. movement of an eye in its socket as it records data). Second, the body also completes the noetic moment by instigating the animating, sense-bestowing process. Quoting Edward Casey, Schmidt added this:

[T]he way I feel my own body being/moving in a place will have a great deal to do with the way I experience that place itself. And if kinesthetic self-awareness is itself the basic form that awareness of my body takes (whether this corporeal consciousness be visual or tactile), then it will constitute a privileged entry into place as I actually experience it. Feeling my body means feeling how it is to occupy the place it is in. (pp. 264-265)

Thus, how a person experiences a particular place can be observed (in research) through sight experience, taste experience, movement experience, and so on. In this case, vocalised data (interview), visualised data (photo elicitation, writing, personalized maps), acted data, etc. can be used in conducting phenomenological research.

Noematic frameworks:

- Place as unit: Schmidt (2020) construed lived space as "that which describes the particular place that the lived body appropriates in its experience" (p. 265). Of Bachelard (1994), Schmidt observed a central thesis of *The poetics of space* as discovery of self "through an investigation of the places it inhabits" (p. 265).
- Interview: In-depth interview is a staple data collection process of phenomenology. The researcher should consider using the data to arrive at *thick description* (see Freeman, 2014, among others)
- If multiple interviews, might think about *entry* (qualitative research notion of negotiating site) and constant comparison (*grounded theory* practice of data focussing and analysis)
- Photo elicitation: It provides in-moment point-of-view. (This is as opposed to memory--which can also be mined as object/data.)
- Inscribed flourish: See line that went for a walk (Ingold, 2006).
- Stuff: Your stuff might describe you (Gosling, 2008).

5.3 Data analysis

Data have to be taken apart as a thoroughfare to meaning.

SUB-NOTATIONS: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES, ELABORATIONS

Nowadays, we almost always operate with a backdrop of theory. Current knowledge is vast and we are already so invariably steeped in it that we are almost certain to be theoretically informed. This might seem at odds with the idea of epoché. Yet, it does not have to be. We would like to propose a way out. During early epoché, the researcher should analyse each known, relevant concept and also identify its associated concepts and interpretations. At the stage of data analysis, those concepts might naturally still erupt, but the research, at this point, should intentionally decline to admit the already pre-identified associated concepts and interpretations (mark them aside) and continue to probe the data for alternative constructs and explanations. If, ultimately, no new comprehensive explanations emerge, then the researcher can begin to admit pre-identified concepts one at a time and compare them with the data.

- Coding is a process for extracting concepts from data. (See Tie et al., 2019, for levels in grounded theory; see Creswell & Creswell, 2018 for basic information).
- It is important to note that we may still use extant theoretical terms to capture phenomena we are observing. What is important is that we not introduce the

concepts until we have discovered their animating agitation [Schmidt (2020) used "animating" in describing Husserl's explication of mental process here] within the data.

- Phenomenology procedure of strict adherence to direct data-emergent concepts is a *trustworthiness* strength because theoretical claims are grounded in data (as it is the case also in grounded theory).
- Other trustworthiness/validation procedures are encouraged. A useful one might be *member checking* (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
- Imaginative variation as a process of testing by concept removal is in fair company. In multiple regression analysis, "stepwise estimation" and "forward addition" and "backward elimination" processes are employed in attempt to determine regression estimates. Structural details (starting with one variable and adding variables based on contribution or starting with whole model and eliminating variables, etc.) will not be presented here. What is relevant is the "spirit" of determination of what factor is [or factors are] important through a process of comparing a "with it" and a "without it" situation (see, among many others, Hair et al., 2010).
- It is possible to conceptualize imaginative variation as process of weighting (estimating importance of) factors.
- We present below a few data exemplars pertaining to (city and space design) and corresponding analytical "grasps" that may have issued through their analyses. What are important are the experiential derivatives in the second column. They are testable possible analytical midway landing-places (or ports) or final essences which we have encapsulated in conceptual terms. We present them in this subsection as analytical/theoretical outcomes issuing from data analysis, but use them as foundation for the subsequent subsection. (Note that sources are attached to concepts in the right column just to indicate that they are viable concepts. They are not to be foregrounded in analysis; bracketing has momentarily neutralised them.)
- Reaching for the experiential soul:

Design problem/data (think object to which thought is directed)	Imagined experiential derivatives (concepts that encapsulate)
Older adult living	Independence and autonomy, social connectedness, lifestyle afforded (de Jonge et al., 2011)
In Melbourne, Australia, tire marks suggest people in-line-skating over structural arch of bridge (Stevens, 2007)	Capriciousness (Stevens, 2007), rebelliousness, anarchy, ludic intrigue
Dérive (Reilly, 2012; Rubin, 2012)	(Marxian) political performance; ludic intrigue (Reilly, 2012; Rubin, 2012)
Sitting on Spanish Steps (once upon a time)	Comfort, ritual
Celebration of sports/match win	Tribalism, ritual
Cavorting on new year's eve or during Mardi Gras	Taking advantage of a "moral holiday" (Ray, 2014)

Parcours; pervasive gaming	Fun, challenge/thrill-seeking, risk/risk-escalation (see Rojek, 1995), challenge-skill balance as dimension of <i>flow</i> (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975)
Office stuff	Identity; expressiveness (Gosling, 2008)
Red light district	Mephitic leisure (Rojek, 2000), biology, fantasy (Harris, 2009)
People watching (Whyte, 1980); watching city (Perec, 1975/2010)	Gaze (Harris, 2009); disinterestedness
Random walk (de Certeau)	Amusement, re-living stories (Akkerman, 2014; de Certeau, 1984), expression (de Certeau, 1984), memory (Rossi)
Theme park attendance (Woodcock, 2019), Las Vegas, instant access to Internet	Hyperrealism (Harris, 2009; Rojek, 1995; Venturi, Brown & Izenour, 1972), disembeddedness (Rojek, 1995)
Expensive shopping street	Social class (Harris, 2009), conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2009)
Urban park	Escape (Harris, 2009); restoration, civilisation [civilising], democratization (on Olmsted: Nicholson, 2004)
Reading in the street	Education (Harris, 2009)
Street corner entanglements	Street corner social engagement (Whyte, 1980), expression in social life
Mobile food vending trailers and carts (often ethnic fare)	Homeostatic vs. hedonistic ends (Johnson, 2013; Kringelbach, 2004), pleasures, hyperrealism (Harris, 2009), disembeddedness (Rojek, 1995)

5.4 Decision

In terms of the designer's task, all of the analyses lead to decision making about how to complete the design. Based on insight provided by discovered concepts, design decision could be of the following types:

- Design out: For example, in second case in table, design to eliminate opportunity for capriciousness, rebelliousness, anarchy or ludic intrigue.
- Design to control
- Design to accommodate

For the adventurous reader who might like to push imaginative variation a bit, we propose this challenge: Is there an even higher order concept that could be derived in each case--a factor that, if removed, would compromise the concepts in the right column? We have one:³ freedom. It has been said that when the concept of freedom is suggested, a large number of people think about freedom to choose (or of choice). Ultimately, this is a limited/myopic understanding of a complex

³ So, this assortment of cases might not be entirely random after all.

concept. There are also other "personifications": freedom to continue; freedom to discontinue; freedom to intensify; freedom to act or to extend or to be left alone or to respond biologically without undue restraint; absence of obligation (Aristotle); absence of constraint (which can be intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural) (Mannell & Kleiber, 2005), and so on. It is not the place to launch into that discourse here, but the interested reader is encouraged to pursue exploration. What is relevant here is that, seen in its richness (fullness) this way, if some form of freedom is removed from each of these cases the real-life activity or place in the left column (which is the design problem) might suffer.

A decision then has to follow, made by a designer as part of the design process: Should solution to a current design problem be to ignore, design to control/force into a behavior silo, mitigate, or design to accommodate? We leave the reader to contemplate this.

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About the Author:

Awoniyi Stephen teaches at Texas State University. Among research interests is exploration of nature of public spaces (sometimes including methodological pathways to that end).

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