

PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH, A REFLEX ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this article is to understand qualitative research particularly phenomenology in context. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach widely used in education and health. In this article we have compared phenomenology with other qualitative approaches. Furthermore, the authors of this paper have explained major types of phenomenological research. Finally, this article discusses the data analysis framework.*

KEYWORDS; Qualitative, phenomenology, types, analysis

INTRODUCTION

The aim of my study was to explore the citizenship behaviour and dysfunctional behaviour of students, along with those factors which influence these types of behaviour within the specific context of higher education in Pakistan. This research paper encompasses key dimensions that I considered to formulate research methodology to answer research questions. To formulate a precise research methodology, it is necessary for the researcher to be familiar with the major research philosophies. For example, Gill and Johnson (2002) have narrated that;

“Research methodology is always a compromise between options in the light of tacit philosophical assumptions, and choices are frequently influenced by the availability of resources” (Gill and Johnson, 2002:2).

In addition, Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) have also asserted that;

“Social research depends upon some basic principles and foundations and there are a number of different models of social research that have been used in social and educational research” (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989:16). Kuhn (1962) terms these core principles ‘paradigms’ and argues that paradigms serve the purpose of being a guide or map, or providing directions to the researcher in the selection of a suitable methodology and methods. However, the methodology and methods need philosophical justification (Hughes and Sharrock, 1980).

Key questions for researcher

To understand and decide about the philosophical position, the researcher has to answer three basic types of questions: ontological questions, epistemological questions and methodological questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Ontological questions deal with the nature and form of reality, either the social world has an objective and independent existence, or it has a subjective and dependent existence in the view of the researcher. Epistemological questions deal with whether the researcher has actively engaged with the social phenomena or whether the researcher has taken an independent position from the phenomena (Collis and Hussy, 2009). Finally, the methodological questions deal with how the phenomena will be studied. In addition, the choice of methodology and methods should adhere to the ontological and epistemological assumptions (Corbetta, 2003). Based on these ontological and epistemological assumptions, the selected research paradigms have been divided into the following three broad categories: positivism, post-positivism and interpretivism (Corbetta, 2003). The ontological position of positivism reflects that social phenomena are context and time free and reality exists independently (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The epistemological position of positivism describes the researcher and phenomena as two separate entities. Furthermore, the object under study does not have any influence over the researcher, nor does the researcher have any influence over the object. The methodological choice for the positivist is pure natural science methodology and data analysis is deductive in nature (Corbetta, 2003).

The ontological position of post-positivism states that reality has an independent existence. However, it could be known probabilistically. The epistemological position reflects that a researcher could influence the subject, and that objectivity could be achieved approximately (Corbetta, 2003). With reference to methodological choice, a post-positivist researcher would utilise qualitative and quantitative data collection and data analysis methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000)

The ontological position of interpretivism is that the world consists of that entity from which people construct and reconstruct the meaning. In addition, some people also construct reality with reference to their context (relativism). Hence, there are multiple realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The epistemological position of interpretivism denotes that the researcher is interlinked with the phenomena and involved in the subjective understanding of it (Creswell, 2013). In interpretivism research methodology, the researcher collects data from the sample population with active interaction, interprets it and then presents that data in non-numerical terms.

Qualitative Research and Quantitative Research

The ontological and epistemological positions guide the researcher to choose between using a qualitative or quantitative methodology. Quantitative research prefers numeracy in the data collection and data analysis, employing the deductive approach to test the theory (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, it adopts the norms of science to maintain objectivity. The research design is structured and formal, aiming to develop generalisations (Matthews and Ross, 2010).

In a quantitative study, the purpose of the literature review is to develop the hypothesis. The quantitative researcher gathers data in an unnatural setting (Corbetta, 2003). However, in quantitative research, it is difficult to develop variables that cover all of the aspects under study (Yin, 2011). Obtaining an adequate response rate from the sample is also a problematic issue in quantitative research.

In contrast to the quantitative approach, selecting a qualitative approach provides certain unique features, as listed below, which enable the researcher to produce rich findings (Yin, 2011):

- Qualitative research enables the researcher to study people in their natural and real world; the context of the research plays a vital role.
- Qualitative research enables the researcher to explore the experiences and perceptions of the selected people.
- Qualitative research allows the researcher to generate new concepts, as well as add new concepts into the existing research as it progresses.
- The qualitative researcher gathers data from multiple data sources and methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

The continuing debate between quantitative and qualitative research does not aim to label one particular approach as superior (Silverman (2005). The researcher should decide which research approach or approaches (quantitative, qualitative, or a mixture of both) serves the purpose in order to understand the phenomena under study.

It was decided that the qualitative approach was the most appropriate tool by which to aim to understand my four research questions. Being a researcher, I therefore argue that the researcher plays a central role in any research process, and that his/her correct engagement with the research can generate reliable data. Qualitative research assisted us to explore the phenomena in greater depth. It allowed us to acquire rich data from participants, as the data was collected in a natural setting utilising multiple data collection strategies. In this study, we have followed the guiding principles of Yin (2011), who suggests that if you want to understand phenomena in the natural setting and through people's experiences, you need to select a qualitative approach.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Various qualitative methodologies were considered for this study. Grounded theory has been used in qualitative research to develop a theory. However, it needs enough participants to be able to understand the phenomena and develop a theory (Stone, 2013). However, the research questions of this study and resources did not allow us to adopt this approach. Furthermore, inductive analysis is carried out in grounded theory research with a motive to create a new theory. However, in this research, we acknowledged the previous conceptions and undertook deductive analysis in the initial phase of the data analysis.

Narrative analysis also tries to capture the human experience, at an ideographic level, through stories of the person related to a particular event, like phenomenology (Riessman, 2002). However, narrative analysis considers the objective meaning of the words of the participants, while phenomenology develops the link between the words and experiences of the participants (what they say and what they experience).

Auto-ethnography is a qualitative research style in which participants describe their personal experiences to understand culture (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). However, Gill (2014) maintains that auto-ethnography research describes the experiences of persons with reference to culture, but in phenomenology the researcher interprets the experiences without necessarily involving culture. Case study methodology was considered, but in this methodology one needs to bind the phenomena by time, place, definition, activity and context from multiple sources (Miles and

Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2013). However, I did not intend to bind the phenomena by time or definition, so therefore a case study methodology was not adopted for this study.

Template analysis is a qualitative approach in which data is collected from a large sample through predetermined codes. However, with phenomenology, there is no such coding and the sample size is small. In addition, phenomenological analysis is concurrent with philosophical assumptions, but thematic analysis lacks any philosophical underpinning (Gill, 2014).

Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (b.1859 - d.1938) is considered the father of phenomenology (Crotty, 1998). Husserl articulated that to understand human experience, the most reliable way is to understand it from the perspective of the person who is experiencing that certain phenomenon. Furthermore, during that understanding, the researcher will have to use bracketing to avoid bias (Crotty, 1998). Cohen and Manion (2000) argue that phenomenology is an anti-positivist approach that understands people's experiences at face value. A concrete example can be seen from Moran (2002) publication where it is asserted that;

“Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experience” (Moran, 2002:4). Husserl's descriptive phenomenology is underpinned by the concept of reduction (Gill, 2014). Reduction depending upon 'epoch' means bracketing where the researcher disconnects his beliefs and understanding about the phenomena. Furthermore, an eidetic reduction is required to capture the essence of the phenomena. In eidetic reduction, the researcher, through an imaginative process using his/her intuition, analyses the variations of the phenomena and ultimately finds the essential variable, which facilitates the researcher to understand the essence of the phenomena.

The concepts of objectivity and reduction are very close to the positivist approach. Martin Heidegger (b.1889 - d.1976), a student of Husserl, raised his concern over the notion of objectivity, maintaining that the individual always understands experience in its context. Thus, humans are context bound (Larkin *et al.*, 2006). Heidegger introduced the concept of interpretation ('dasein' in German, 'being there' or 'presence' in English) into phenomenology (Crotty, 1998), thus acknowledging the interpretative role of the researcher (Gill, 2014).

Broadly speaking, phenomenology can be divided into two broad categories (descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenology), based on the work of Husserl and Heidegger respectively. It is important for the researcher to understand this division in order to choose his philosophical position, research methodology, methods and analysis techniques. Interpretive phenomenology was selected for this study. However, there are various common themes among all phenomenological approaches (Gill, 2014):

- All phenomenological approaches reject the concept of objectivity based on positivism.
- To understand human experience is the shared purpose of all phenomenological approaches.
- Experience is comprehended through the lens of the participant.
- Need to collect information from a homogeneous population through purposive sampling.
- Thematic analysis is part of the research.

Hermeneutics

Phenomenological research does not only describe the phenomena, but also makes sense of the participants' accounts through active engagement with the subject (Larkin *et al.*, 2006). Hermeneutics is concerned with the grammatical and psychological interpretation of the experience. Grammatical interpretation is based on both the exact meaning and psychological meaning, but also involves hidden meanings in the language.

Heidegger studied phenomenology with a hermeneutics lens. Phenomenology is derived from the Greek word 'phenomena', which means appearance and logos, to understand, so thus logos are concerned with interpretation (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Heidegger also maintained that the researcher has a 'for-conception' (meaning prior experience or pre-conception). However, the researcher first has to work for the new objects, then for-conception. The notion of logos aids the researcher to revisit the concept of bracketing and considering phenomenology as an interpretive process.

Gadamer (b.1960 - d.1990) is another key writer on hermeneutics. Gadamer's ideas about for-conception are in line with Schleiermacher (1998) and Heidegger. However, he maintains that the researcher could start the first interpretation with for-conceptions until the new reality replaces his/her for-conceptions (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Finlay (2012) has stated that the interpretative role of the researcher in phenomenological research is highly significant in order to examine and understand the meaning of the words used by the participants. He believes that hermeneutics enable the researcher to understand experiences in their particular context, so that the researcher can use his/her experience to explain the phenomena under study. The final description of the phenomena is thus developed from the joint reflection of the researcher and the participants in a particular situation and in a particular context.

The hermeneutic circle (see Table 1) is a widely used concept by various hermeneutics writers. In this circle, the researcher has to understand a part in order to understand the whole, and to understand the whole the researcher has to understand a part (Smith *et al.*, 2009). In this study, I used students' accounts (parts) to understand the whole (SCB and SDB) and vice-versa.

The Part	The Whole
The single word	The sentence in which the word is embedded
The single extract	The complete text
The particular text	The complete oeuvre
The interview	The research project
The single episode	The complete life

Source: Adapted from Smith *et al.* (2009:28).

Research Design

Bryman (2012) suggests that when a research study has to collect data from various participants at a single point in time, irrespective of whether the data collection strategy is quantitative or qualitative, a cross-sectional design is an appropriate choice for the researcher. For my study, I collected data from various participants through focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews at a single point in time, and thus I followed the suggestion of Bryman (2012) and adopted the cross-sectional design.

Site Selection

I selected students at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan (UOSJP) as subjects for my data collection. UOSJP is the second oldest university in the country, with more than 25,000 students. All of the data was obtained from the Faculty of Commerce and Business Administration, because I wanted to collect data from a homogeneous population in a similar context.

Sample Size

For qualitative studies, the researcher needs to select a sample based upon appropriateness and adequacy criteria (Morse and Field, 1995). The criteria of ‘appropriateness’ refers to selecting a sample that adequately describes the phenomena in depth, utilising a sufficient number of participants to understand the phenomena.

The adequacy criteria were linked to both the focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews as discussed below. Focus groups can be of various sizes. For example, Krueger and Casey (2014) suggest that larger sized focus groups of 10-12 participants are difficult to manage. Morgan (1996) recommends a group of just four participants, as it is easy to manage and all participants can participate actively. Prior to working in the field, I voluntarily participated in a focus group conducted by a charity, in order to acquire a practical sense of focus group procedures. It was a small sized focus group and I found it suitable for information generation. Based on that experience and the suggestion of Morgan (1996), plus being a lone researcher, I concluded that a larger sized focus group (10-12 participants) would be too difficult for me to manage on my own. I therefore decided to conduct small-sized homogeneous focus groups. Homogeneity refers to factors that are common between the participants (Krueger and Casey, 2014). In this study, the participants of each focus group were senior students of the same academic year and same institution, selected from two similar departments in the same university

it is vital to make a decision about the appropriate number of semi-structured in-depth interviews required. Creswell (1998) suggests that, for phenomenological research by interview, a sample size of five to twenty is often sufficient. However, Francis *et al.* (2010) justify the sample size of their study through the concepts of saturation (being the number of interviews beyond which no new themes develop). Therefore, we decided to conduct semi-structured interviews until saturation. Initially, fifteen interviews were conducted to check the saturation level, involving eleven male and four female students. Although a significant amount of information was gathered from these interviews, we opted for a further five interviews (three male and two female students) to check and ensure that the saturation level had been achieved. Thus, a total of twenty interviews were conducted, involving equal numbers of senior students from each institute.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken by adopting a hermeneutical phenomenological approach based on the work of Heidegger (1962) and Van Manen (1990), which acknowledges the interpretative engagement of the researcher with the data. The research question was developed through the lens of the literature review and theoretical framework, and my reflex awareness became involved within the data analysis process. For this reason, we do not claim a pure objective or unbiased position in this research paper.

First of all, we translated the data into the English language, as each focus group and semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted in the native language of the participants (i.e., Sindhi or Urdu) and the authors of this paper are fluent in all three languages. Each participant was randomly assigned a pseudonym for the sake of their anonymity and identity protection. We started to read all the English transcripts in order to obtain a sense of the phenomena. We repeated this step several times, and this frequent reading made me familiar with the data. Once this sense of knowing the data had developed through the frequent reading of the transcripts, we then re-read each individual transcript and extracted the significant statements, initially based on the theoretical framework and literature review insights.

At this stage, I divided the accounts into four broad categories. These categories included those statements that showed citizenship behaviour, statements that highlighted the antecedents of citizenship behaviour, statements that identified dysfunctional behaviour and statements that reported the antecedents of dysfunctional behaviour. This procedure is known as deductive analysis. Yin (2011) suggests that new researchers should start their data analysis using a deductive approach. We marked the important statements using coloured highlighter pens.

In the next phase, we adopted an inductive approach in order to analyse each transcription more extensively and identify new themes. After dividing the students' experiences into four broad sets, we revisited the transcripts with minimum subjective involvement, so as to develop a relatively objective understanding. After carefully comparing the generalised themes generated by these deductive and inductive approaches, we identified 135 themes from the focus groups' data and 178 themes from the semi-structured in-depth interviews. These themes were re-arranged by meaning, through focused coding. The relationships between the various themes were analysed, then these themes were divided into 'super-themes' and 'sub-themes' using axial coding. The integrated data analysis of the focus groups and interviews finally produced a list of

Evaluation of this Research

In research, the type of methodology selected (qualitative or quantitative) needs to prove its validity and trustworthiness. Yin (2011) explains that the researcher who adopts appropriate data collection methods and analysis techniques to describe the phenomena precisely is conducting valid research. In this study, we employed a sequential multi-method (i.e., focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews). The focus groups enabled me to understand a wide range of concepts prior to proceeding to the next phase of the study. The subsequent semi-structured in-depth interviews enabled me to generate a rich description of the phenomena under study through the student voice.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) have used the term 'trustworthiness' to check the validity of a research study, suggesting four criteria which should be adopted to ensure the validity of the research: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

Credibility

Research credibility can be achieved through using multiple sources or methods to produce coherent results and triangulation. In this study, we utilised two data collection methods (focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews) to produce integrated findings. Hence, this study fulfils the criteria of credibility.

Transferability

Qualitative research uses small sample sizes to understand the phenomena being researched in depth, so as to generate rich, detailed and useful data in a particular context. That is why the findings of such studies often cannot be replicated due to the changing nature of real life. However, such thick descriptions may help another researcher to use the data in their own different context (Bryman, 2012).

Although this study investigated SCB and SDB in detail, due to the qualitative nature of this study these findings cannot be generalised. However, this study can provide guidance and information to other researchers who intend to explore these phenomena within the Pakistani higher education context.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that how well a researcher describes their data collection methods, sample selection and data analysis will reflect upon the ultimate dependability of their study. In this study, we have explicitly discussed my choice of research methods, explained the sampling procedure with the help of tables and the literature, and discussed the steps taken in the data analysis procedures. We therefore argue that in view of the forgoing this research to be well planned and the results to be dependable.

Conformability

The conformability criteria reflects whether a researcher has maintained the necessary objective position. As a purely neutral position is not possible in qualitative research, the researcher needs to make sure that he/she does not overtly or covertly have an influence over the research process and findings (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, Maxwell (2009) suggests that spending a long time in the field to collect data enables the researcher to better understand the context and setting of the research, thus enhancing its validity.

Being the ex-students and current employees of the University of Sindh, we were familiar with the context and setting of our research and the subjects to be studied. We spent four months in the field, which enhanced our understanding of both the context and setting. Although it is not possible for a qualitative researcher to become completely separated from their research, we consider that we achieved this aspect reasonably, by keeping in mind the possibilities for the introduction of potential bias, how to avoid it, and to accurately describe the phenomena being investigated. We regularly attended a meditation session and this practice helped us control my preoccupied concepts which might otherwise have interfered with my research.

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