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Embracing researcher subjectivity in phenomenological research: A response to Ann Scott

Abstract

All researchers experience times of confusion and uncertainty and risk getting lost in the complex ambiguity of the research journey. We are inevitably challenged by the research process especially when it comes to trying to disentangle ourselves from our participants given the relational context of the research. The research process both profoundly affects and is affected by the researchers. Research can never be a 'value-free' zone - researcher subjectivity is always present. There is a clear need for researchers to be reflexive and to critically interrogate the impact of their subjectivity on the research and of the research on them. This process mirrors our work as psychotherapists where we reflect on clients' stories while analysing our own responses and the dynamics of the evolving relationship between ourselves and our client.

In this paper I examine some of the ways that phenomenological and heuristic researchers in particular manage – and even embrace - their subjectivity. Two processes are especially involved: the *epoché* and reflexivity. Both these concepts are briefly described here to act as a guide for researchers wishing to explicitly work with their subjectivity. I also offer practical research examples to illustrate how the theory can be applied in practice.

Introduction

The qualitative research process is notoriously challenging to handle. Embarking on it can be likened to going exploring in uncharted territory where the path is uncertain, the terrain unpredictable. Such a journey inevitably leaves its mark on us. What we discover along the way may fill us with wonder and move us or it may perplex and even threaten us. With excitement and perhaps some anxiety we negotiate our perilous path. If we're lucky we'll have a guide to ensure our safety and help us go in the right direction. Still, we may go round in circles or suddenly find solid ground giving way to treacherous swamp (Finlay, 2006a).

Ann Scott (2008) recognises these kinds of subjective responses. She suggests that novice researchers are particularly at risk of being overwhelmed by data or feeling as if they are 'drowning' in a messy relational process fraught with ambivalent responses. In particular, she argues, they face the danger of getting enmeshed with their co-researchers and becoming 'lost' in the process. In fact, all researcher-explorers experience times of confusion and uncertainty, and risk losing their way in the complexities of the research journey. We are inevitably challenged by the research process and, given its relational context, never more so than when it comes to trying to disentangle ourselves from our participants. Here, "we can all too easily fall into the mire of the infinite regress of excessive self analysis and deconstructions at the expense of focusing on the research participants and developing understanding" (Finlay, 2002a, 212).

Scott (2008) raises some intriguing questions about how researchers might use themselves reflexively in the research process. She notes – rightly - how research can never be a 'value-free' zone and how researcher subjectivity is ever present. The research process, as she demonstrates, both profoundly affects and is affected by the researchers. There is a clear need for researchers be reflexive (i.e. self aware) and to critically interrogate the impact of their subjectivity on the research and of the research on them.

For qualitative researchers, then, subjectivity is an inescapable part of life. From this, several key questions present themselves. How do we engage this researcher subjectivity? How exactly do we do reflexivity? How can we manage these processes without getting 'lost', without 'drowning' in the complexity of the process?

In this paper I examine some of the ways by which phenomenological and heuristic researchers in particular seek to manage – and embrace - their subjectivity. Two relevant processes, the *epoché* and reflexivity, are briefly described and practical research examples are offered to illustrate how the theory can be applied in practice.

Researcher subjectivity in phenomenological and heuristic research

Over the last few decades, qualitative researchers working within the tradition of empirical descriptive phenomenology (e.g. Giorgi, 1985) have sought to minimise references to researcher subjectivity and instead focus on participants' 'protocols' (e.g.

concrete descriptions of lived experience). Colaizzi's (1973) voice provided a challenging counter-point. For him, self-reflection constituted an important first step of the research process. He argued that researchers needed to engage in 'individual psychological reflection' to become aware of their own biases and preconceptions and then attempt to eliminate (or bracket) them from the analysis of participants' descriptions. Colaizzi saw that the researcher's own experience could be used as data, with variations of meaning worked through. Revealing the researchers' own pre-understandings gave the researcher a starting point for reflection towards understanding others – also helped those reading the research.

Moustakas (1990) elaborated these ideas when he pioneered a heuristic method which celebrated, rather than sought to deny, the subjective nature of the researcher. Through his ideas concerning 'creative self-processes' and 'self-discoveries', Moustakas nudged the researcher centre stage. "The self of the researcher", he said, "is present throughout the [research] process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge (1994, p.17).

Many contemporary phenomenologists now argue the need for researchers to explicitly and reflexively engage their own subjectivity (Langdridge, 2007; Walsh, 1995; Finlay, 2008). Here, researchers are seen as inevitably bringing themselves as subjective beings into the research. Our pre-conceptions and evolving understandings are said to be both our 'closedness' and our 'openness' to the world. In other words, our pre-conceptions both blinker us and enable insight. Taking this as a starting point, it is important for researchers to reflect on how they are impacting on and shaping the research.

At another level, research can be seen as arising out of an intersubjective relationship in which 'researcher' and 'participant' are in fact co-researchers. Here, the 'researcher' becomes part of what is being researched. Research, in this sense, does not involve a participant talking to a passive, distant researcher who receives. Instead, it emerges out of a constantly evolving, dynamic, co-created relational process to which both contribute (Finlay and Evans, 2009 *Forthcoming*).

Increasingly, there are calls for researchers' role as interpreters when formulating findings to be acknowledged. In the process of *hermeneutic reflection* (interpretive reflection) (Finlay, 2003a), for instance, the researcher steps away from initial pre-understandings to gain sufficient distance from which to critically and reflexively interrogate them. As new thoughts and insights begin to challenge these pre-understandings, the

researcher makes interpretative revisions. It is through this process (of making ourselves more transparent, of relentlessly striving to recognise, bracket and challenge our pre-understandings, and of examining how the horizons of researcher and co-researcher meet) that the understanding of the Other arises.

In the descriptive and hermeneutic research approaches described above two particular processes to do with researcher subjectivity are implicated: the epoché and reflexivity. These processes (both separately and taken together) have probably generated more uncertainty and confusion than any other in the phenomenological tradition. For this reason it is worth dwelling briefly with what these processes involve.

The **epoché** is the process by which the phenomenological philosopher [or researcher] attempts to put aside the taken-for-granted natural world and world of interpretation in order to see the phenomenon in its essence. "In the epoché", Husserl explained (1954/1970, p.177), "we go back to the ways in which...subjectivity ... 'has brought about,' and continues to shape the world". The process involves a personal transformation and, as Husserl puts it, a "reorientation of the natural mundane attitude" (Husserl, 1954/1970, p.258) where objectivity is constituted out of subjectivity. For Husserl, engaging the epoché involves first bracketing scientific theory and knowledge in order to return to phenomena as they are lived; second, bracketing the idea that perceptions are 'real' putting the focus on subjective meanings (Finlay, 2008). Prior assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon being studied are set aside in order to engage a new way of thinking and experiencing. The aim is to connect directly and immediately with the world as we actually experience - as opposed to conceptualise - it.

Following Husserl, a number of philosophers – Heidegger (1927/1962), Gadamer (1975) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) among them - have explored the nature of this process, or taken issue with it. While there has been general agreement on the need to rein in the influence of pre-understandings in order to be *more open to seeing phenomena in new, fresh ways*, there has also been a certain moving away from Husserl's position. For Husserl the focus of the phenomenological project lies in *managing* pre-understandings (and thus our subjectivity) by bracketing or excluding them. In contrast, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty, in line with their view that we cannot totally escape our historicity and our own personal 'take' on the world, view our subjectivity and pre-understandings as resources. They emphasise the need to exploit these subjective horizons of experience and understanding (Dahlberg *et al.*,

2008). Our subjectivity or our “effective involvement in the world is precisely what has to be understood...In order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p.xiv).

These competing understandings of the epoché combined with the fact that the process is often difficult to sustain in practice, have reinforced the sense of confusion which surrounds the concept. All too often the epoché is presented as simply a method or procedure, an initial step in research where subjective bias is acknowledged and bracketed towards establishing rigour and validity. This misunderstands the process. In fact, achieving the epoché requires a radical transformation in one’s approach and thinking, even new way of being. Far from being a process to be invoked only at the beginning of research, the epoché involves reflexive vigilance and struggle (Finlay, 2008). As the researcher brackets certain preconceptions, more will arise at the level of awareness (Valle, King and Halling, 1989).

Wertz (2005) describes this bracketing process in a fuller way as being part of a special phenomenological attitude of “wonder” that is highly “empathic”:

The researcher strives to leave his or her own world behind and to enter fully...into the situations of the participants. The researcher empathically joins with participants... This sharing of the experience is the basis for later reflection on meanings and experiential processes. This attitude involves an extreme form of care that savours the situations described in a slow, meditative way and attends to, even magnifies, all the details. This attitude is free of value judgments from an external frame of reference and instead focuses on the meaning of the situation purely as it is given in the participant’s experience (2005, p.172).

Importantly, Wertz is highlighting the nature of the phenomenological attitude as one of ‘openness’. This attitude is similar to our approach in therapy where therapists clear a space to allow the client to present themselves. The debate at stake here is whether the therapist-researcher leaves their world behind (outside that space) or reflexively engages their world within that space as part of being fully ‘present’. The former position would tend to be adopted by traditional phenomenologists and the latter by hermeneutic and relationally orientated phenomenologists (Finlay and Evans, 2009 *Forthcoming*).

Just as the epoché involves different conceptions and practices, so too does reflexivity. Different versions of **reflexivity** are practiced according to the methodology adopted (Finlay and Gough, 2003). For phenomenological and heuristic researchers, reflexivity often involves introspection along with reflection on intersubjective dynamics (Finlay, 2003b; Finlay, 2009 *Forthcoming*).

When it comes to introspection, reflexivity may involve the researcher reflecting on their own condition and experience. Far from being self-indulgent emoting, such introspection is focused and geared to achieving a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest. For example, Abu-Lughod (1988) found that her reflections on her experience of learning to live as a ‘modest daughter’ within a Bedouin community offered her a way to a broader understanding of the sense of modesty experienced by some women in reference to their veiling practices:

It was at this moment, when I felt naked before an Arab elder because I could not veil, that I understood viscerally that women veil not because anyone tells them to or because they would be punished if they did not, but because they feel extremely uncomfortable in the presence of certain categories of me” (Abu-Lughod, 1988, cited in Hertz, 1997, p.98).

In the following extract from my own phenomenological research exploring the ‘life world of the occupational therapist’ (Finlay, 1998), I reflected on the feeling of anger I was experiencing with one of my co-researchers. Processing this anger in my reflexive diary enabled me to achieve new understandings:

“My anger was stopping me from listening and empathising and I needed to examine what was happening. I was feeling angry on behalf of a patient who needed to stay longer in hospital to complete a range of crucial assessments, but the therapist was unable to challenge the doctors who were intent on discharging the patient. On reflection, I interpreted that my anger mirrored the therapist’s anger at herself. She regularly put herself down for not communicating more assertively with doctors. On delving deeper, I located what appeared to be the real source of both our angers: the hierarchical system investing the doctor with such power. This then became a key theme in my generic analysis of the life world of occupational therapists. By reflecting on our shared emotional responses, I was led to locate the context that prompted those responses and to recognise its importance in shaping how therapists experience their work.” (Finlay, 1998, pp.454-5).

Beyond reflecting on the phenomenon of interest, researchers need also to reflect on relational elements and how the research is being produced in a particular social context. Here, reflexivity can be understood as the process by which the researcher explicitly engages in thoughtful, critical, self-aware analysis of the conscious and unconscious intersubjective dynamics between the researcher and the researched mirroring the approach we take in therapy. If research is recognised as the joint product of the researcher, the co-researcher and their relationship, then different researchers will unfold different findings and negotiate different meanings (Finlay, 2002a, 2002b).

The reflexive process is a means of analysing how one particular researcher left their imprint on the research findings. Hunt's (1989) research on the police offers a good example of this. In the following extract she identifies how her status as an unwanted female outsider raised a number of issues (of which she had been unconscious) which then affected her research relationships.

"Positive oedipal wishes also appeared to be mobilized in the fieldwork encounter. The resultant anxieties were increased because of the proportion of men to women in the police organization and the way in which policemen sexualized so many encounters... The fact that I knew more about their work world than their wives also may have heightened anxiety because it implied closeness to subjects. By partly defeminizing myself through the adoption of a liminal gender role, I avoided a conflictual oedipal victory. That the police represented forbidden objects of sexual desire was revealed in dreams and slips of the tongue...the intended sentence "Jim's a good cop" came out instead "Jim's a good cock." In those words, I revealed my sexual interest in a category of men who were forbidden as a result of their status as research subjects. In that way, they resembled incestuous objects." (1991, p.40).

I could offer many examples from my own research about how relationship dynamics between my co-researchers and myself have influenced the stories that emerged and the quality of my subsequent analysis. In this extract from the reflexive diary I kept during a study with occupational therapists, I examined my experience of Jane:

"Jane was...reticent and reserved. She did not initiate any disclosures, which in turn made me much more active. I felt pushed to ask more questions and I became (reluctantly) much more directive. In the process I ended up asking what was, for me, an unusually large number of closed questions. Did I sense a vulnerability in her and, by asking closed

questions, was trying to protect her from disclosing too much? Interestingly, Jane, more than any of the other therapists, got me disclosing more to her. She took the initiative to ask me questions, and I obliged, partly in my desire to share something with her in return. I also felt a need to confide in her. From the first moment I felt drawn to her as a therapist and as a beautiful woman. Somehow I wanted a part of her niceness and nurturing - perhaps even be her client? At the same time I could see that her general 'niceness', combined with her controlling quality (with her asking me questions) and lack of self-disclosure, were all effective defences in stopping me from pushing/challenging her. Jane and I, together, seemed to be engaged in an exercise to stop me probing too much." (Finlay, 1998, p.240-2)

The processes of the epoché and reflexivity are fundamentally intertwined. By definition, they are enacted in a myriad of ways which cannot be predicted, predetermined or prescribed. On the one hand, phenomenological/heuristic researchers attempt to lay aside previous understandings as they strive to engage the epoché. At the same time they also engage reflexivity as they seek to become aware of lingering prejudices or expectations and manage their impact on the research (Finlay, 2008). The challenge for the phenomenological researcher is to achieve a delicate balance: to lay aside relevant presuppositions and other subjective responses while recognising the impossibility of doing so completely. If the researcher is to 'bracket' pre-understandings in order to be empathetically open to the other, some reflexive self-attention is required in order to become aware of what needs to be bracketed in the first place. We thus become caught up in a "process of continually reflecting upon our interpretations of both our experience and the phenomena being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of our previous understandings and our investment in particular research outcomes" (Finlay, 2003a, p.108).

Embracing researcher subjectivity: an example from a case study

The following example of how one might apply both the epoché and reflexivity to embrace researcher subjectivity comes from some case study research I conducted into the lived experience of having mental health problems (Finlay, 2004). Kenny, a middle-aged man who had struggled with depression and anxiety for over three years, was my co-researcher (participant) on this occasion. In the following

extract, Kenny is trying to explain to me (Linda) what it was like to experience the early days of his breakdown. I, in turn, attempt to reflect back his experience. I attempt to reflexively interrogate my usual understandings in an effort to see afresh the meanings of his anxiety. (The extract below has been created out of the interview transcript itself and my reflexive notes - set in italics - which I wrote after the event).

"Kenny: "I was just shaking the whole time, having panic attacks. I locked myself in the bedroom. It took weeks and weeks before I would go out. I would read, submerge myself in books, escape. I wasn't interested in anything. I just wanted to be in my bed. I suppose in some ways it was my little nest. I was safe in my bedroom and nobody could get to us. The worst part of it was when I was thinking. Then it seemed to get worse. 'What's happening to me? What am I doing?' Then I would get into a panic. I was scaring myself. It was a dreadful experience - one that I wouldn't wish on anyone. To be scared is one of the worst things. It is a method of torture."

Linda: "It sounds incredibly scary – all the more so because being like that was so different from the way you normally are."

Kenny: "Yeah, I definitely wasn't me-self."

Linda: Was that the scariest bit, facing someone, facing yourself as someone you didn't know?

Kenny: I was just very fearful – I kept jumping at me own shadow.

As I was listening to Kenny speak, I suddenly realised that I was reacting quite strongly to him and became aware my own bodily responses. I remember noticing how my arms were folded tightly across my stomach. I was protecting myself, but also 'holding my self in' and somehow 'holding myself together'. I then saw that Kenny had adopted the same posture as he recalled his trauma (had I mirrored his posture or had he followed mine?).

[The word 'remember' is significant here. Remembering is not just a cognitive function: it's about reiterating responses in the body: we remember.]

With us both holding ourselves, it seemed an important moment, one that called for me to tune into what we were both doing. I was a little surprised at the sensations and my reactions. Usually, I would interpret this non-verbal gesture as representing a symbolic wish to protect oneself from others or a way of giving oneself some nurturing/comforting. But here in this situation I

was somehow sensing an additional, even different, interpretation. I checked it out with Kenny:

Linda: "As you're speaking and remembering, Kenny, I can see you're holding yourself tightly. And I'm doing the same as I'm listening to you. [shared laughter]. It's like you're trying to hold yourself together. Is it like, kinda to stop yourself falling apart. Is that what it was like for you?"

Kenny: "Yeah. I would go off to bed and just hold myself like that. Sometimes it seemed like for hours. One minute I was alright and the next I could just go into a rage about the simplest thing. It could be a trivial thing and I'd lose it completely. Again I sought the sanctuary of the bedroom. I knew that there I couldn't hurt people. The worse thing about it was that I was feeling guilty and that made me get more angry."

I felt his confusion: his rage against himself and this crazy 'alien' it seemed he had become. I felt his fear of losing himself, of losing it in general, and his concern that he might hurt others in his anger and craziness. I felt his guilt about this anger and understood why he might want to lock himself away. It was the only place he could be safe. Perhaps it was the only place he could recover himself to reassure himself that he was still there.

Later, when I was analysing the transcript, I replayed this dialogue over and over as a way of helping me to focus on what it would be like to be Kenny. I adopted that holding posture and 'remembered' the (my? his?) emotions. Again I got that strong sense of 'holding together' that which was falling apart and holding in the craziness and rage so they didn't break out and destroy others...

Should I have 'put out of play' the skills and understandings I had acquired over the years as a therapist and academic in the field of psychology? Or was it more important that I reflect - in the hermeneutic tradition demands - on their likely impact on the research? I support the latter position. My therapist/psychology background are so much a part of me I could not have maintained them apart from me without coming across oddly to Kenny, such as behaving stiffly perhaps. And, then, what story would he have told if I had had such a change of personality? ." (Finlay, 2006b).

This example of my interaction with Kenny demonstrates the role played by what I call 'reflexive bodily empathy' (Finlay, 2006c). This is a research process which involves engaging, reflexively, with the embodied intersubjective relationship we have with participants. In this reciprocal process, researchers aim to find ways to allow the Other to present to and through themselves.

As I sought to empathise with Kenny, I engaged in what phenomenologists call 'an imaginal self-transposition.' This follows Husserl's recommendation that phenomenologists imaginatively transpose themselves to the other's place: "I not only empathize with his [sic] thinking, his feeling, and his action, but I must also follow him in them" (Husserl 1952/1989, cited in Davidson, 2003, p.121). This process of 'following' another is realisable only if the researcher is open to the possibility and if they can let go of habitual routes; in other words, engage the epoché.

In Kenny's case, I sought not only to imaginatively transpose myself to Kenny's situation but also to bracket my previous understandings of mental health problems and the meaning of non-verbal gestures such as rocking and holding oneself. Paradoxically, I had to let go my understandings of his responses in order to better understand his responses. Then, I had to be open to new emerging understandings. In order to facilitate this changed perspective, I needed to reflect (*reflexively!*) on its meanings and my role in co-creating the meanings.

The fact that I engaged this process of reflexive bodily empathy reveals some limits in the presuppositions I was bracketing. It is significant that I retained my presuppositions about intersubjectivity and the possibility of gaining empathetic understanding in the first place (Ashworth, 1996). I was also falling back on accepted psychological knowledge positions: for example, that non-verbal behaviours have certain meanings which can be interpreted. At the same time I have to acknowledge that I used my therapist skills and experience to draw Kenny out. I would argue, following Gadamer and Heidegger, that any understanding I am able to achieve is rooted purely in my own history and my particular pre-understandings plus my reflections on how my world and the world of my co-researcher meet.

All I feel I can do in this (and any other) research situation is to acknowledge my previous assumptions and experience and examine how these may have impacted on the findings and the research process/relationship. I accept the provisional, tentative, emergent and contextual nature of the findings I have co-created with my co-researcher/s. As with all examples of qualitative research, the findings remain partial and provisional, the product of specific co-researchers coming together at a particular point in time and space.

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined the theory and practice of the epoché and reflexivity, understood as attempts to embrace researcher subjectivity.

I've also attempted to show how these twin processes go hand in hand in phenomenological and heuristic research and how these merge with a sense of empathetic openness as part of a broader 'phenomenological attitude'.

For phenomenologists like myself, the research process will always be a matter of tension. We move constantly between striving for "detachment and being reflexively self-aware; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight; between naïve openness and sophisticated criticality" (Finlay, 2008, p.3). The task at hand involves a thorough embracing of subjectivity and at the same time the attempt by the researcher to manage their own evolving understandings. The researcher must simultaneously embody the contradictory stances of being 'detached from', 'open to' and 'aware of' while also living their own experience and responding and reacting accordingly. And they must do all this while guarding against self-indulgence and solipsism, and while striving to ensure that "the focus of the research does not shift away from the phenomenon onto the researcher" (Finlay, 2008, p.4).

As I see it, the value of phenomenological research lies in its ability to capture multiple, ambivalent, slippery and ambiguous meanings within our social world and our experience of being human. In the best circumstances, where researcher subjectivity is embraced via the epoché and the sensitive practice of reflexivity, some of these meanings may surface and take a certain shape. But based as they are on interpretations and intersubjective responses, such 'findings' can only ever be tentative and exploratory. In using "a mirror of moving shadows" (McCleary quoted in Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.xviii), we should not mistake our 'reflections' (in the various senses of the word) for reality.

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