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Epoché and objectivity in phenomenological meaning-making in educational research

Introduction

Phenomenology has impacted 20th century thinking not only because of the rigorous descriptive approach it brings to research, but also because it offers a concept for accessing the difficult phenomena of human experience. Widely understood as the study of essence, phenomenology can be further refined through hermeneutics and the processes of interpretation. Within this refining and delineating process is embedded a tension that phenomenological researchers must negotiate, traversing the phenomenology of being concerned with finding the essence of the things, whilst balancing the hermeneutics of a phenomena in which we see that everything has its being in language and interpretation.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is dynamic and evolving (Speigelberg, 1960) and is essentially the study of ‘lived experience’ (van Manen, 1990), with its emphasis on the world as lived by a person, not the world or reality as something separate from the person (Valle et al., 1989). This requires the researcher to adopt an investigative position that focuses the researcher’s interpretative skills to comprehending ‘What is this experience like?’ for the subject (Polkinghorne, 1983). Phenomenology in the field of education can encapsulate the anthropological and epistemological interest in the meaning of events via presenting understandings of the phenomenological lived quality of particular educational situations, acknowledging the personal, cultural and social remembrances of the phenomenon under question.

Phenomenology and the role of the educational researcher is to seek to understand the ‘life world’ of ‘participants’, without resorting to categorization or conceptualization. Here, the phenomenological orientation toward lived, situated experience informs how educational researchers may construct their investigative lens of inquiry. This relation between phenomenology and education requires an informed yet responsibly detached approach to researching and comprehending the character of experiences, situations and practices. This stance or attitude involves a process of extricating essences of experience and the bracketing of presuppositions whilst being the vessel for interactive engagement, reflecting the embeddedness of researchers’ interconnectivity, relationality and intersubjectivity to the phenomenon. It is this aspect that remains the most dynamic and evolving nature of phenomenology.

For all phenomenologist researchers, the phenomenological ‘stance’ applies rigorous acknowledgement of the role of consciousness, through the observation and analysis of individual and personal epistemological realities as they arise from their unique perceptions (Pietersma, 2006). Phenomenology provides a compelling and complex orientation to understanding subjective perceptions of participants, and analysis of data via the process of phenomenological reduction or bracketing is a development to the process adopted by Husserl (Osborne, 1994). Husserl proposed the need to ‘bracket’ out the outer world as well as individual biases of the researcher to achieve contact with essences of a subject’s lifeworld. The practice of ‘the epoché’ (henceforth termed ‘epoché’) is a process of bracketing or mindfully separating particular beliefs about the investigated phenomena to see and understand it clearly and purely.

Epoché can be described as the researchers’ conceptual and cognitive synthesis of the phenomenological reduction and researcher intuition toward the essences derived from the studied phenomenon. This perceptual processing conducted by the researcher is mediated by conceptual development by numerous phenomenological scholars that have extended our understanding of epoché through the consideration of dialogue, text, historicity of the subject at hand, as well as various conceptualisations of embodiment, the suspension of assumptions and cultivations of doubt. Rather than be daunted, the educational researcher should partake and experience this aspect of phenomenological enquiry with excitement.

What is epoché?

Epokhē is an ancient Greek term typically translated as the ‘suspension of judgment’ and also means ‘withholding of assent’, is originally a principle of ancient Greek scepticism (Mates, 1996). The Pyrrhonist philosopher Sextus Empiricus claimed that ‘epoché’ is a state of the intellect “on account of which we neither deny nor affirm anything” (Empiricus & Bury, 1933, 1.4) and remains a cornerstone of academic scepticism. In practice, this requires an intentional disruption of researchers’ tendencies to overlay personal assumptions on interpretations of the experiences and perceptions of others. Thus, the tendency to retreat to personal beliefs in the interpretation of phenomena can result in a ‘pseudodoxia’ – an apparent or surmised comprehension that can potentially lead to false conclusions about the subjective perceptual realities of others.

The novice phenomenological researcher may well ask as to how does one go about the process of epoché? Surveying a considerable evolution of phenomenological analysis, this chapter provides meaningful insights into how various philosophers and researchers have

applied their interpretative stance – and hence their cognitive and procedural ways of embarking on epoché.

The researcher's stance – the 'natural attitude'

Husserl viewed consciousness as a co-constituted dialogue between a person and the world (Valle et al., 1989) and saw access to the structures of consciousness not as a matter of induction or generalization, but as a result of direct grasping of a phenomenon. Husserl took his starting point from what he called the 'natural attitude', the beginning of the process of coming face to face with the ultimate structures of consciousness, or essences (Edie, 1987). By giving meaning to the subject's subjective field of experience whilst eliminating all presuppositions, Husserl's, epoché acquired a specific content of its own that concentrated on the pre-interpreted world of perception.

Husserl's goal in undertaking epoché was to perceive things through intuitive 'seeing'. He sought to show the purely immanent character of the subject's conscious experience by means of careful description. However, the meanings that arise in and through such experience are not simply subjective or arbitrary. Husserl saw experience occurring between the active making of meaning and its passive reception, arising both through active passivity and passive intention on the part of researcher and participant (Husserl, 2001).

The goal of phenomenology for Husserl is a descriptive, detached analysis of consciousness in which objects, as its correlates, are constituted by the subject. Husserl applied as a principle of his philosophy the procedure of 'bracketing' all common-sensical beliefs. This was just one of a series of *reductions* that Husserl proposed to ensure that the researcher presupposed nothing. Husserl referred to bracketing *our* existence of the world and making accessible *participant* consciousness so that essences can be grasped. Husserl referred to this as *Wesensschau*, the intuition of essences and essential structures that help the researcher form and maintain a multiplicity of variations whilst remaining objectively aloof and unchanged by it. Such eidetic, or descriptive reduction is a method by which the philosopher moves from the consciousness of individual and concrete objects to pure essences with the aim of achieving an intuition of the 'thing or being' (Juntunen, 1986). Husserl considered a third layer or reductive essentialising, the transcendental reduction, or transcendental-phenomenological reduction that provides the researcher with access to "the transcendental ego," or "pure consciousness" of the participants accounts. This extended reductive process of bracketing or epoché draws researcher perceptions of meaning

transmitted through language, Husserl asserting that the logic we seek through analysis is founded through using language as “a calculus that is useful for special logical aims” (Husserl, 1979, p. 21) involving describing how pure consciousness actually works for the subject.

The existential analytic of lived experience

Whilst both Husserl and Heidegger took exception to the Cartesian split between mind and body (Jones, 1975), it was Husserl’s protégé Heidegger who developed phenomenology further, with the concept of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) and the assertion that researchers need to investigate the *experience* of the phenomenon (Guignon, 1993). Heidegger (1983) conceptualised a hermeneutic – a phenomenology of existence where *bildung*, or personal formation and the phenomenological meaning making process became an existential and co-existential practice, an engagement in the production and creation of meaning that evolved provisionally. While Husserl focused more on the epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and the object of study, Heidegger moved to the ontological question of the nature of reality and ‘being’ in the world. This led to another of the basic tenets of phenomenology; that of the exploration of the ‘life-world’ or ‘lived experience’, examined entirely from ‘being in’ that experience. The way this exploration of lived experience proceeds is where Husserl and Heidegger disagreed; Husserl focused on understanding beings or phenomena, Heidegger focused on the situated meaning of a human in the world. Husserl forged the necessary advancement from general psychological thinking to one’s personal existence in the world. Husserl was interested in acts of attending, perceiving, recalling, and thinking about the world where human beings are understood primarily as knowers, whilst Heidegger in contrast viewed humans as being primarily concerned with an emphasis on their fate within the world (Annells, 1996). Heidegger established the ongoing critique and examination of both researcher and subject consciousness being not separate from the world but thinking and acting as a formation of one’s background or situatedness in the world as their historically lived experience. He believed that understanding is not a way we know the world, but rather the way we are, and that utilising what he termed an ‘existential analytic’ – our perception of this ‘lived experience’ is indissolubly related across cultural, social and historical contexts (Munhall, 1989).

This initial philosophical outlining begins to map the negotiative and transactional nature of phenomenological enquiry. The need for researchers to balance many factors in the application of epoché; the objectivity and suppression of assumptions, the cognizance of a priori stances we adopt. Implicitly or explicitly, these positions have important consequences for the practical conduct of inquiry, as well as for the interpretation of findings. This realm of meaning-making is engaged with the realisation that hermeneutic-phenomenological research is not simply because we always understand and interpret things, but that as researchers we too are reflective and evolving practitioners whose interpretive powers and palette develop over time. It highlights the relevance of how the subject of investigation is constituted: whether cognitively or in a more distributed fashion that integrates knowing and acting. This problematizes a focus on epistemology (knowing), that overlooks ontology (being/becoming). Based on these concerns, phenomenologists have evolved a stratum of meaning making stances and hermeneutic-interpretative concepts.

Hermeneutics

Whilst phenomenology is usually described as studying the essence, the study of hermeneutics is of the processes of interpretation. Philosophical approaches that consider different approaches and stances to hermeneutic interpretation have through critique, reflexivity, reflection, rigour and pragmatism continued to make phenomenology a vibrant and intriguing methodology. This evolutionary development has facilitated a concomitant development in the approach, usage and application of epoché, and the success of phenomenology as a rigorous and robust science. This development is evident in hermeneutical stratification and complexity that can influence the reductive process – the epoché.

Originating from the Greek word meaning to translate or interpret, ‘hermeneutics’ is one of the earliest Western philosophical ideas to deal with the relationship between language and logic in a comprehensive, explicit and formal way. More recently, in his explorations of the nature of understanding, Friedrich Schleiermacher included all human texts and modes of communication. Schleiermacher referred to hermeneutics as the science of linguistic understanding, whose principles served as the foundation for all kinds of textual interpretation (Ricoeur 2008, p. 51). To this aspect Schleiermacher drew a clear distinction between speaking and understanding that comes in the form of a dialogical relationship through which the goal of the researcher is to understand the mental process or true meaning

of the participant. Schleiermacher distinguished between grammatical interpretation and psychological interpretation, both of which are required in the interpretation of the inner thoughts of the subject and the language used in written text (Schleiermacher, 1978).

Meaning-making through merging ‘horizons’

Hans-Georg Gadamer extended this work into practical application, not by developing a hermeneutic procedure of understanding, but by clarifying further the conditions in which understanding itself takes place (Gadamer, 1976). Arguing the ‘matter’ through which researchers interpret, he asserted that hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which it speaks (1960/1998).

Gadamer labelled the hermeneutic experience *Ehrfahrung* and viewed interpretation as a dialectical interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the meaning of the text he termed a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer, 1976). This term added further complexity to the prejudicial concerns raised by Heidegger in which a ‘horizon’ represents an investigative range of vision that includes everything seen from a particular vantage point. Gadamer argues that having a horizon “means not being limited to what is nearby, but to being able to see beyond it ... [W]orking out of the hermeneutical situation means the achievement of the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 302). A person with no horizon does not see far enough and overvalues what is nearest at hand, whereas to have a horizon means being able to see beyond. Questioning of the self as insider and analyst, and the constraint and affordance of limitation or possibility the researcher situates thinking as researcher, as well as of the participant are an essential aspect of the interpretive process. It is this depth of consideration that helps make new horizons, re-interpret and fuse perspectives through an iterative reflective process. Gadamer (1997, p. 375) adds:

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else’s meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one’s own thinking on the subject ... To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.

For Gadamer, understanding and interpretation are bound together, that interpretation is always an evolving process, challenging definitive interpretation (Annells, 1996). Gadamer argued that as researchers, we bring to interpretation and analysis a historically effected consciousness that will involve some prejudice. He did not support the notion that a knower can leave his/her immediate situation in the present merely by adopting an 'attitude'. His view acknowledged the unquestionable presence of a particular history and culture that shaped them and worked to extend the perspective that these positions play a positive role in the researchers search for meaning.

Gadamer argued that 'truth' and 'method' sat at odds with one-another and took this ontological step further by questioning the relationship of language and text to being, understanding and existence. To Gadamer, hermeneutics is not a process in which an interpreter finds a particular meaning, but a philosophical effort to account for understanding as an ontological process, incorporating a dialogism within the hermeneutic experience that enables the researcher to see something different than previously thought. This exploratory research experience both conforms and confirms our expectations and the possibility to exceed and illuminate further. As our horizon is changed in an experience, our future anticipations change, as do our understandings of experiences from the past. To Gadamer, the researcher's experience is one where nothing ever appears the same again following a hermeneutic experience. That is, we see ordinary things from one world view or paradigm – a 'horizon', that becomes juxtaposed with difference from which we conceive new entities. This can allow the educational researcher's world as teacher in classroom immersed in language, dialogic pedagogy and interplay of evolving new learner and teacher understandings. The teacher acts as reflective practitioner in and on action (Schon, 1983), and as such all teachers are in effect researchers of their own practices with the capacity to cast new horizons of understanding in their classrooms.

Whilst Husserl asserted the reduction through intentionality and constituted objects, and Heidegger a second conceptual reduction of 'being-in-the-world' and transcendence of being, then French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion urged a third kind of reduction – the *interloqué* (Marion, 1998). Marion's reduction process maintained a stance of questioning particular phenomenon. Marion contended that "there are phenomena of such overwhelming givenness or overflowing fulfillment that the intentional acts aimed at these phenomena are overrun, flooded—or saturated" (Caputo, 2007, p. 164). Marion thus attends to reduction and the epoché through an intriguing perspective, that is entirely on the phenomenon as it gives itself without the mediating act of the subject or of consciousness. He explains:

Even for a gaze aiming objectively, the pupil remains a living refutation of objectivity, an irremediable denial of the object; here for the first time, in the very midst of the visible, there is nothing to see, except an invisible and untargetable (invisible) void ... hides the very horizon of the visible. (Marion, 2002, pp. 81-82)

This interpretative standpoint suppresses assumptions of intentionality by exploring the difference between the self who intentionally sees objects and the (reflexive) self who is intentionally seen by a counter-consciousness, whether the counter-conscious likes it or not. Marion defines this aspect of intentionality as its invisibility; how one can see *objects* through intentionality, but in the invisibility of the counter-conscious other, *the self* is seen. It is this consideration to epoché and the perceiving of what is real and a lived experience that is at the crux of phenomenological development and evolution.

In the stratification of hermeneutic phenomenology, nowhere has the diversity of the researcher stance been more prevalent than in the application of the epoché to the analysis process. Philosophers who identify with the practice of phenomenology are extraordinarily diverse in their interests, in their interpretation of the central issues of phenomenology, in their application of what they understood to be the phenomenological method, and in their development of what they took to be the phenomenological programme for the future of philosophy. Heidegger and Gadamer sought to uncover the life-world or human experience as it is lived. Their ontological and epistemological differences to perceiving and finding meaning-making in the lived experience has led to an ongoing exploration of this fundamental idea, and the way epoché is cognitively and processurally applied. It is from this tradition that hermeneutics is concerned with the solitary understanding and interpretation of being in the world and how our different ways of being in the world are connected to our understanding of things. Yet, as phenomenology has become more established, schools of thought sought to adopt a more pragmatic phenomenological focus on topics and concerns that seemed relevant to professional practice and to everyday life. Hermeneutic phenomenology has developed through the increasing complexity to which the researcher deduces their natural stance and the interpretation of the subjects 'life-world' that "display 'styles' and measures of depth that are each very unique and at the same time universal" (van Manen, 2019, p. 912).

Embodied knowing and attunement of perception

The evolution of hermeneutic phenomenology has also grown to focus on how the educational researcher attunes to the phenomenon, the embodied human subject, the relationship with objects or other people, and how this may be perceived and interpreted. Meanings arise from the spatial and temporal relationships we have of our existence that embody our relationship with different temporal dimensions. Not only towards our embodied knowledge and the shaping of both what and how we experience, think, mean, imagine, reason, and communicate, but of the plurality of meanings that arise according to one's position, context, and intersubjectivities that impact on the ways meaning-making – and reduction/*epoché* is deduced.

The educational researcher/teacher should be cognizant of the asymmetric relationship between adult and child and how this phenomenology is intertwined within institutional culture, the interpretation of education presupposed as *bildung*, and the possibility of personal and cultural resistance and transgression of educational purposes and aims (Friere, 1993). Numerous phenomenologists illuminate investigative pathways the educational researcher may utilise in exploring these facets of attunement to perception.

Jean-Paul Sartre established an existential humanism that considered the emotions, cognitions, desires as well as perceptions apparent to the human condition (Sartre, 2002). His key proposition and ontological argument was the priority of existential over essential; that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1948), and thus had a direct impact on the way experience is perceived and interpreted. Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the locus through which we are knowing of the world and maintained that the body – and that which it perceived could not be disentangled from each other. This primacy of embodiment led him away from phenomenology towards what he called an ‘indirect ontology’ or the ontology of ‘the flesh of the world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). He regarded consciousness and the human body as perceiving, intricately intertwined and mutually ‘engaged’ and considered a bodily cognizance ‘communing with’ experiences that incarnate a personal subjectivity into the educational researchers’ meaning-making process. It is through this knowing ‘body in the world’ that intentionality is perceived through a pre-conscious and pre-predicative understanding of the world's makeup. Merleau-Ponty conceived experience upon which our body has a ‘grip’ (*prise*), while this grip itself is a function of our co-naturality with the world's things where sense of self is an emergent phenomenon in an ongoing ‘becoming’. The educational researcher should act with awareness and discernment of such grip and embodiment as they elucidate an objectivity between themselves, the subject and

environment, aware of the linguistic and cultural baggage incumbent in the analysis of action, intentionality and perception.

In light of this, the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach developed by Max van Manen describes a reflection consisting “of the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive—sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, in the way language speaks when it allows the thing themselves to speak” (van Manen 1990, p. 111). This argument of finding the essence and hermeneutic interpretation through language, text and embodiment correlates with how subtlety and finesse epoché allows an attunement to words uttered in the presence of the actual lived experiences (van Manen, 1990, pp. 8-9). Confounding these subtleties of interpretation and epoché, Derrida problematised logo-centrist perspectives by arguing that the researcher is confronted with a multiplicity of ‘language games’ and ‘life-worlds’ that can deeply challenge notions that would allow an assemblage of knowledge to synthesize into a coherent system (Derrida, 2016).

Hermeneutic phenomenology has and continues to evolve, and interpretivist frameworks of inquiry and analysis in educational research support the ontological perspective of the belief in the existence of not just one reality, but of multiple realities that can be specifically constructed and more or less informed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The implication I contend is that the input the researcher plays is vitally important to the process, analysis and ultimate outcomes of inquiry, and that through the process of epoché educators and teachers as researchers investigate and surmise various realities. van Manen raises the beginning researchers very own self-reflective existential questioning – How does the novice researcher apply expertise and the art of being sensitive when they lack the very experience deemed necessary in applying phenomenological and hermeneutic knowledge? Herein lies the journey of the researcher to engage in the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology and from your own understandings, rich experiences, mentoring and guidance from an experienced phenomenological researcher develop your own phenomenological and hermeneutic skill and knowledge.

Using hermeneutic phenomenology and epoché as a methodology

In the application of hermeneutic phenomenology and epoché Lincoln and Guba (1985) remind us of the ontological questions that frame our investigations: “What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?” and epistemologically, “what is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?” (p. 108). Their methodological probing of the essential

aspects of self-critique in conducting qualitative research maintains distance and objectivity devoid of values or biases – assuming the stance of a ‘disinterested scientist’ whilst maintaining protocols of reliability, validity and trustworthiness in reducing experiences to core themes and structures of experience.

The phenomenologist must tread mindfully between this distancing and acquaintance with the subject and the phenomenon, directing “the gaze toward the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations—and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative affect” (van Manen, 2007, p. 12). If we seek to understand what Heidegger (1985) calls ‘in-being’ – the everyday being-involved-with the things of our world, then the process of reduction and epoché is the extricating and maintaining of essences from the researcher’s ‘in-seeing’. Phenomenology in practice as a practical application is not a method or a planned program of procedures or techniques. Rather, it is a style of thinking and an attitude of reflective attentiveness to the primordialities of human existence that provide an intelligible meaning to our life-worlds.

Contemporary applications of epoché

The proliferation of a wide range of translated texts from German sociology and human sciences has influenced educational researchers and the approaches and processes they may undertake. A range of approaches to phenomenology both as an empirical method and as an insight for pedagogy and practices have arisen. Such pluralist perspectives in educational research have considered the gradual acquisition of skilful coping or expertise such as Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus’ phenomenology of skill acquisition (2004). Their eschewing of a rule-bound cognitive-oriented information processing approach and support of an ecological and dynamical approach highlights how phenomenology can inform education of effective, engaging pedagogical thought, application and practice. Approaching educational research with such a stance to epoché can reveal how things in our learning and teaching worlds show up as meaningful and how we as educators and education researchers are able to act intelligibly. Things are given meaning according to the ways they are integrated into our practices – we are thus able to act because our background practices dispose us to responding in a certain way to the things and people we encounter in our going about in the world.

Phenomenological accounts in education can reveal even deeper understandings of what it invariably means to live and develop as a learner in various education settings and

circumstances. With appropriate epoché, research can evoke and detail felt awareness of learners' and teachers' development, rather than reify antiseptic awareness of 'universal stages' of development. Such accounts can reveal isolated characteristics of cognition, affect, socialization and morality distilled from participant lifeworlds and their attendant cultures. An important aspect of educational research is acknowledging that the phenomenology of child development rests upon our capacity to revisit our own childhoods, that the autoethnographic remembering of one's childhood is not a reliving of it; rather we 'suspend' our adult awareness to reconnect with the child within and find that such bracketing can only occur and be told as remembering adults, shaping our meaning-making processes.

Researcher positioning of this kind can promote reflective and reflexive actions and judgements toward educational practices, thinking, and the ethics and conduct of educational practice. Epoché contributes a deliberative sophistication and acumen to the study of ethical expertise. A researcher's stance or natural attitude into the ethics and morals of teacher practice (Friere, 1992) involves a moral consciousness that begins with involved ethical comportment on the part of the researcher. It is from this strategic positioning that researchers may deeply consider and research moral questions from a hypothetical perspective (Habermas, 1982).

Educational research of a phenomenological orientation can contribute significantly to the reparation of embodied-relations and theory-practice problems in curricula oriented to human issues. It can reveal for critique the complex and contradictory nature of social experiences, problematise curriculum and pedagogy development, institutional aims and charters, and highlight social and personal implications from the use of technologies. Researcher stance and epoché can reveal teacher impacts, student receptiveness, motivation and efficacy and other dynamic and contested aspects of the educational milieu. Epoché can thus impart a researchers' educational sophistication of understanding, interpretation and acumen.

Phenomenology calls for the researcher to use prudent judgement and responsible principles rather than strict adherence to rules to guide the research process. Though there are many and varied descriptions of the analysis process which essentially involves wrangling with text (in every form), identifying 'emergent themes', synthesising meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the participant's experiences that provides a structure of the experience. Van Manen advocates setting thoughts to paper (1990). Smith and Osborn (2003) favour creating idiographic narrative accounts with verbatim extracts which may trigger re-coding and re-organising of thoughts towards educational theory, practice and concomitant

categorising of themes. Throughout all this, the researcher performs epoché. The cognitive oscillation between previous interpretation and deeper re-interpretation occurs through stages of analysis. Through the analysis process of reduction, epoché takes a central and cerebral oversight by reducing meanings to the being-in-the-world descriptive essences of the phenomenon. Bracketing and epoché are incorporated into intentional focusing on the experience throughout the multiple stages of interpretation that allow patterns to emerge, criticality maintained in the interpretive process, and reflection of how interpretations arise from the data remaining crucial (Koch, 1996). This process requires the ability of the researcher to be pathic, reflective, insightful, sensitive to language and their position of authority and power over the participant, working to connect phenomenological, the relational and the educationally contextual (Polkinghorne, 1983).

Core to the analysis and production of meaning in phenomenological methodology and strategy is reading and writing. This interpretive and iterative process involves dialectical reworking, revisiting, reimagining as an embodying of the participants' life-language-world and a fusing of horizons of possibilities. This requires researcher discernment (Giorgi, 1985) as well as faithfulness to the lived description (Beck, 1993), fulfilling a self-validating insight and textual testament of an experience (Husserl, 1970).

Researchers studying a group, organisation, or prevalent culture can operate as a neutral and static outsider, but can also utilise phenomenological methodologies as an 'insider' (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). Often intimately engaged with(in) their research domains, insider researchers bring richness and insight to apposite methodological and ethical issues regarding phenomena. Dahlberg's (2006) term of 'bridling' refers to the bracketing or epoché process, acknowledging the restraining of insider pre-understandings of phenomena. Dahlberg adopts a reflective stance that helps 'slacken' the firm intentional threads that tie us to our experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Wickins and Crossley (2015) argue that critical attention and reflexivity of insider perspectives can be foregrounded through an 'alongsider' approach to phenomenological investigation. Their telling metaphor of the 'research ship' in rough seas, rather than observing the 'data ship' blurred and from afar, carefully steering beside, influenced by the same elemental forces and context but retaining a separate identity and perspective that can allow the researcher to engage as proximal participant. Such research highlights the duality of researcher as insider-outsider, their role as both observer and provocateur in the data gathering process, and the complexity of their stance and process of epoché and the self-awareness of the evolving and changing researcher positionality as insider/outsider. The

researcher can even be an empowering conduit to finding truth through providing agency, trust, voice and educational change to those most susceptible to ambivalence, inaction, and even neglect and abuse within educational institutions.

The analysis/ process of epoché relies on the insightfulness and at times improvisatory capacity of the researcher to pursue illuminating experiences or feelings. Deconstructed hermeneutic positioning highlights the researcher demands of self-reflexivity, an ongoing self-conversation about the experience while simultaneously contemplating the moment, constructing interpretations of the experience whilst mindfully questioning how interpretations came about (Hertz, 1997) and how analytic themes may be developed. Common to all is epoché as a hermeneutic process that invites participants into an ongoing conversation, a dialectic between the pre-understandings of the research process, the interpretive framework and the sources of information at their grasp.

Final thoughts

The idea of epoché for phenomenological researchers resides in the object of research as a real, intentional and profound existential questioning for the subject in question. Epoché is not only a method or process, but also a necessary attitude required for descriptive and hermeneutic variants of phenomenological methodology. It is the enabling of a value judgement that cautions the researcher to refrain from valuation and subjectivity. It is constitutive through the sense-making and artefact rendering in that it produces necessary features out of itself, urging us to suspend our position for or against the content of analysis as the researcher elucidates a reality and truth through method. This means maintaining a psychological stance, seemingly at odds with our natural attitude of mind – though it functions as an instrument of the mind. Epoché and the way we bracket stems from what Heidegger terms our ‘inceptuality’ of the life-world and the phenomenon, that is our stance toward the source and beginning of meaning, and how we may transform it (Heidegger, 2012). It is a creative and flexible process that represents the complex interplay and interweaving of the phenomenological account of the participant through the interpretative role of the researcher by giving voice to specific experiences. It requires an array of intellectual and intuitive and imaginative capacities, a balance of the technical and systematic and the interpretive and expressive that allows our curiosity to flourish– all the while bracketing our assumptions. Phenomenological inquiry requires a threshold of proficiency in

a range of complex skills – interviewing, analysis, interpretation, writing, and researchers at different stages will have different degrees of fluency and adeptness at these skills.

In this chapter, I have unlocked and clarified aspects of our responsibility in engaging with epoché and understanding its centrality to phenomenology. I hope to prompt and promote further investigation and application of the philosophical constructs driving the evolution of reduction and epoché. In educational research, embodied perspectives and the ways in which teachers and students ‘commune with’ aspects of learning, teaching, environments, and educative relationships remains fertile and underexplored.

Whilst discourse pertaining to where the researcher positions themselves across the descriptive/hermeneutic spectrum is prevalent, I hope to spark reflective scholarly discourse into how the concept of reduction and epoché evolves across the professional lifespan of practitioners of phenomenological practice. Novice and experienced phenomenologist alike should reflect on the, at times complex and personal evolution and growth in researcher conceptualisations and expertise in observing and analysing ‘the things as they are’ through ones’ research-life.

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