

Journal of Phenomenological Psychology

JOURNAL OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Aims & Scope

The peer-reviewed *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* publishes articles that advance the discipline of psychology from the perspective of the Continental phenomenology movement. Within that tradition, phenomenology is understood in the broadest possible sense including transcendental, existential, hermeneutic, and narrative strands and is not meant to convey the thought of any one individual. Articles advance the discipline of psychology by applying phenomenology to enhance the field's philosophical foundations, critical reflection, theoretical development, research methodologies, empirical research, and applications in such areas as clinical, educational, and organizational psychology. Over its four decades, the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* has consistently demonstrated the relevance of phenomenology for psychology in areas involving qualitative research methods, the entire range of psychological subject matters, and theoretical approaches such as the psychoanalytic, cognitive, biological, behavioral, humanistic, and psychometric. The overall aim is to further the psychological understanding of the human person in relation to self, world, others, and time. Because the potential of Continental phenomenology for enhancing psychology is vast and the field is still developing, innovative and creative applications or phenomenological approaches to psychological problems are especially welcome.

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Fordham University
Bronx, NY 10458
USA
Wertz@Fordham.edu

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Journal of Phenomenological Psychology (print ISSN 0047-2662, online ISSN 1569-1624) is published 2 times a year by Brill, Plantijnstraat 2, 2321 JC Leiden, The Netherlands, tel +31 (0)71 5353500; fax +31 (0)71 5317532.

Journal of Phenomenological Psychology

VOLUME 39 (2008)



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Printed in the Netherlands (on acid-free paper).



A Dance Between the Reduction and Reflexivity: Explicating the “Phenomenological Psychological Attitude”

Linda Finlay

The Open University, United Kingdom

Abstract

This article explores the nature of “the phenomenological attitude,” which is understood as the process of retaining a wonder and openness to the world while reflexively restraining pre-understandings, as it applies to psychological research. A brief history identifies key philosophical ideas outlining Husserl’s formulation of the reductions and subsequent existential-hermeneutic elaborations, and how these have been applied in empirical psychological research. Then three concrete descriptions of engaging the phenomenological attitude are offered, highlighting the way the epoché of the natural sciences, the psychological phenomenological reduction and the eidetic reduction can be applied during research interviews. Reflections on the impact and value of the researcher’s stance show that these reductions can be intertwined with reflexivity and that, in this process, something of a dance occurs—a tango in which the researcher twists and glides through a series of improvised steps. In a context of tension and contradictory motions, the researcher slides between striving for reductive focus and reflexive self-awareness; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight. Caught up in the dance, researchers must wage a continuous, iterative struggle to become aware of, and then manage, pre-understandings and habitualities that inevitably linger. Persistence will reward the researcher with special, if fleeting, moments of disclosure in which the phenomenon reveals something of itself in a fresh way.

Keywords

phenomenological psychology, phenomenology, reduction, reflexivity, researcher subjectivity

[Phenomenological reflection] must suspend the faith in the world only so as to *see it*, only so as to read in it the route it has followed in becoming a world for us; it must seek in the world itself the secret of our perceptual bond with it . . . It must question the world, it must enter into the forest of references that our interrogation arouses in it, it must make it say, finally, what in its silence *it means to say*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, pp. 38–39)

The “phenomenological attitude” involves a radical transformation in our approach where we strive to suspend presuppositions and go beyond the natural attitude of taken-for-granted understanding. It involves the researcher engaging a certain sense of wonder and openness to the world while, at the same time, reflexively restraining pre-understandings. Most phenomenologists would agree that this stance—or perhaps more accurately *process*—is one of the more (if not *the most*) significant dimensions of phenomenological research.

In his foundational work, Husserl (1913/1962, 1936/1970) was the first to argue that a different—special—attitude is required for the phenomenological project. One of his greatest contributions was to articulate the *reduction*¹ as a radical self-meditative process where the philosopher “brackets” the natural world and world of interpretation in order to see the phenomenon in its essence. Over the course of his lifework, he made nuanced distinctions between various reductive processes including the epochés of the natural sciences and the natural attitude, the transcendental reduction and the eidetic reduction. Other philosophers, such as Heidegger (1927/1962), have since recast the phenomenological project, elaborating existential and hermeneutic dimensions and re-emphasising the embeddedness of the philosopher’s historical/cultural context.

Following these philosophers, psychological researchers have been challenged by the problem of how to articulate and apply the phenomenological attitude in practice. While there is consensus that a change of attitude is required, *how* that change of attitude is to be effected has been the subject of prolonged debate. Debates abound about how to convert what is

¹) Husserl acknowledges the complexity of his explication of the reduction. He writes of different steps of “disconnexion” or “bracketing” forming a “graded reduction.” While he notes a plurality of reductions, he also accepts their “unitary form”: “we shall speak of *the* phenomenological reduction.” [italics in the original] (Husserl, 1913/1983, p.66).

essentially a philosophical method into a practical, empirical one. No other process has generated more uncertainty and confusion in phenomenology; self-perpetuating misunderstandings abound. Novice researchers are particularly disadvantaged as they commonly mistake the bracketing process as a straightforward method of setting aside assumptions and as an initial step in research of acknowledging subjective bias towards establishing rigour and validity. The radicality, complexity and discipline of the phenomenological attitude as a whole can be completely missed.

In this paper I describe my own way of operationalising the phenomenological attitude within empirical psychological research. I aim to show that the reduction(s) can be intertwined with reflexivity² and that, in this process, something of a dialectical dance occurs. Here I see the dance as one where the researcher glides through a series of improvised steps with their participant, involving sharp shifts of focus and rhythm, more reminiscent of a tango than a graceful waltz. There is tension as the researcher moves between striving for reductive focus and being reflexively self-aware; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight; between naïve openness and sophisticated criticality. The phenomenological attitude here does not simply involve suspending researcher presuppositions. It is a process in which the researcher opens themselves to being moved by an Other, where evolving understandings are managed in a *relational context*.

The phenomenological process, in this view, does not involve a researcher who is striving to be objectivistic, distanced or detached. Instead, the researcher is fully involved, interested and open to what may appear. Researcher subjectivity is prized and intersubjectivity is embraced. The challenge is for the researcher to simultaneously embody contradictory stances of being “scientifically removed from,” “open to” and “aware of” while also interacting with research participants in the midst of their own experiencing. An additional challenge is for the researcher is to stay vigilant,

²⁾ Applied to research, reflexivity can be understood as thoughtful, self-aware evaluation of the intersubjective dynamics between the researcher and researched. It involves critical self-reflection of how researcher’s background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impacts on the research process. Reflection involves ‘thinking about’ something after the event. Reflection can be contrasted with the concept of reflexivity which aims to capture a more immediate, dynamic self-awareness (Finlay and Gough, 2003).

both to avoid charges of self-indulgence and solipsism, and to ensure that the focus of the research does not shift away from the phenomenon, and/or participants' lived worlds, to the researcher.

In order to explicate the phenomenological attitude, I begin by laying out the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the phenomenological attitude and describe how it has been operationalized in psychological research practice. I then offer three examples of moments from the interviewing phase in my own phenomenological research. These examples illustrate how I attempted to be open and to reflexively interrogate my previous understandings, highlighting how this process enabled me to bracket and see with fresh eyes which, in turn, extended my access to phenomena and deepened my analysis.

Philosophical Foundations

The term “reduction” was first articulated by Husserl as a radical self-meditative process where the philosopher puts aside the natural world and world of interpretation in order to see the phenomenon in its essence. The process, he explains, involves a personal transformation and “reorientation of the natural mundane attitude” (1936/1970, p. 258) where objectivity is constituted out of subjectivity. For Husserl, the reduction helps us to free ourselves from our prejudices and previous understandings, securing a level of detachment such that we can encounter the things themselves in their appearing. Prior assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon being studied are set aside.

We can do nothing but reflect, engross ourselves in the still not unfolded sense of our task, and thus secure, with the utmost care, freedom from prejudice, keeping our undertaking free of alien interferences... and this... must supply us with our method. (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 134).

Engaging this attitude involves a preparedness to be open to whatever may emerge rather than prejudging or prestructuring one's findings. The aim is to connect directly and immediately with the world as we (and, through empathy, as our research participants) experience it—as opposed to conceptualising it, by “suspending prejudgements, bracketing assumptions, deconstructing claims, and restoring openness” (van Manen, 2002a). More

than simply involving some mechanical bracketing or “purification” (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 248) technique, Husserl stresses the “vocational” character of this phenomenological attitude, suggesting a sustained and focused stance or “habitual direction of interest” (1936/1970, p. 136).

Following Husserl, a number of philosophers, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty among them, have elaborated the nature of this phenomenological attitude. While there has been general agreement on the need to rein in the influence of pre-understandings in order to see phenomenon in fresh, new ways, Husserl’s view of reduction has been challenged, or at least nudged to go in different directions. For Husserl the focus of the phenomenological project is on *managing* pre-understandings (such as scientific theories) by bracketing (abstaining from, suspending) them. In contrast, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty, in line with their view that we cannot escape our historicity and our own personal ‘take’ on the world, extend the scope of presuppositions to include “fore-understandings” and suggest the possibility of *exploring* their meaning, content and impact. Drawing on these developments after Husserl, phenomenological psychologists suggest the possible value of exploiting these horizons of experience and understanding.

The Reductions

For Husserl, the reduction delivers the philosopher to the “groping entrance into this unknown realm of subjective phenomena” (1936/1970, p. 161). A number steps or procedures are involved including: 1) the epoché of the natural sciences; 2) the epoché of the natural attitude; 3) the transcendental reduction; and 4) eidetic reduction.³ Each of these results in something being put in “brackets” and in a “reduction” of the field which commands one’s special focus of attention.

The first “epoché of the natural sciences” (Husserl, 1936/1970) brackets scientific theory and knowledge and “reduces” the field of investigation to the lifeworld from the standpoint of the natural attitude. This involves a

³) The different stages and grades of the reduction are not always so clearly delineated. While in *Crisis* he mentions eight different reductions and in *Ideas I* he speaks of phenomenological reductions in plural, in *Cartesian Meditations* he runs transcendental-phenomenological reduction together (Moran, 2000).

return to phenomena as they are lived and experienced instead of beginning with scientific preconceptions.

All sciences which relate to this natural world, though they . . . fill me with wondering admiration, though I am far from any thought of objecting to them in the least degree, I disconnect them all, I make absolutely no use of their standards, I do not appropriate a single one of the propositions that enter into their systems . . . I may accept it only after I have placed it in the bracket. [italics in the original] (Husserl, 1913/1962, p. 111).

The second “epoché of the natural attitude” (referred to by Husserl as the phenomenological epoché) brackets the “reality” of the natural, taken-for-granted lifeworld. The task, as Husserl points out, is to go beyond the natural attitude paradoxically in order to discover it (Husserl, 1936/1970). This epoché leads first to the *phenomenological psychological reduction*. Here Husserl wants to examine the phenomenon as a “presence” without attributing existence to it, that is, reducing the field to the psychological. Specifically, the focus is on subjective meanings, i.e. the meaningful ways the lifeworld presents itself and the subjective processes that constitute these presentations (e.g., through perceptions, emotions, beliefs, kinestheses, intersubjective communalizations). “We put out of action *the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude*; we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being” (Husserl, 1913/1983, p. 60). This process, according to Husserl, involves more than simply critically purifying oneself of bias and prejudices, instead it involves entering a new *way of being*. “The gaze made free by the epoché must likewise be . . . an experiencing gaze” (1936/1970, p. 153).

In the third “transcendental reduction,” Husserl proposes an even more radical epoché which involves standing aside from one’s subjective experience and ego, in order to be able to focus on transcendental consciousness. In claiming that “consciousness which constitutes the world is not part of the world” (Philipse, 1995, p. 280), Husserl takes a more purely philosophical direction rendering this version less directly relevant to the psychological researcher’s sphere of interest.⁴

⁴) Unfortunately, misinformed critics are rather too quick to latch on to these particular ideas about transcendence to legitimate a wholesale rejection of the phenomenological project as being unrealistic.

Combining these three reductions, Husserl describes the phenomenological attitude:

A new way of experiencing, of thinking, of theorizing, is opened to the philosopher; here, situated *above* his [*sic*] own natural being and *above* the natural world, he loses nothing of their being and their objective truths... he simply forbids himself... to continue the whole natural performance of his world-life; that is, he forbids himself to ask questions which rest upon the ground of the world at hand... questions about being or not-being, about being valuable, being useful, being beautiful, being good, etc. All natural interests are put out of play. But the world... has not disappeared... it is just that... it is under our gaze purely as the correlate of the subjectivity which gives it ontic meaning... I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*. [*italics in the original*] (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 152)

Finally, in the “eidetic reduction,” also called *intuition of essences*, the invariant characteristics and meanings of the phenomenon are described. Here, the philosopher/researcher attempts to intuit consistent or fundamental meanings without which a phenomenon could not present itself as it is. Husserl formalized a procedure to give rigor to the search for essences called *free imaginative variation*. This procedure involves freely changing aspects of the phenomenon in order to distinguish essential features from those factual ones that are particular, accidental or incidental.

While Husserl referred to the reduction in various ways throughout his long career, he was clear that a fundamental change in way of seeing—akin to entering a new “realm”—was required. Turning the tables on the traditional scientific understanding of reduction as a narrowing or abstracting process, Husserl saw the reduction as a movement towards perceiving and reflecting in more complex, layered, expansive and all-encompassing ways.⁵ He continually emphasised the *radicality* of the reduction, which he saw as potentially transformative:

⁵ Fouché (1984) problematises this issue in arguing that the two steps of the epoché and reduction proper conflict somewhat. The aspiration of clarity and certainty arising out of the epoché is more compatible with science, she says, while the richness and complexity aspired for in the reduction is more compatible with the arts.

Perhaps it will even become manifest that the total phenomenological attitude and the epoché belonging to it are destined in essence to effect... a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such. (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 137)

Horizons of Experience

Existential and hermeneutic philosophers following Husserl have problematized the challenge of the reductive process by highlighting our embeddedness in the world: “We live in the horizon of the lifeworld” (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 138). Understanding, they say, *depends on* us recognising our pre-understandings and historicity. Our “horizons of experience” (e.g. temporal horizons of our past experiences and future anticipations) are implicated and penetrate any perception of the world we may have. Thus, Husserl’s followers and subsequent contributors to the phenomenological movement extended Husserl’s work on reflection to exploring the role of interpretation. In his existential-hermeneutic phenomenology, for example, Heidegger (1929/1962) saw interpretation as inevitable, a basic structure of our *being-in-the-world*: “Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us... understanding always pertains to the whole of Being-in-the-world.” (1929/1962, pp. 191–192, 194).

Gadamer (1975) agrees with Heidegger’s hermeneutic shift that our “fore-conceptions”⁶ cannot be forgotten or transcended. “All that is asked,” says Gadamer, is that we should:

⁶ Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty tended to use a different lexicon to describe the concept of presuppositions or pre-understandings. Husserl’s use of “apperceptions” or “appresentations” is comparable to the “pre-understandings” of which Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty speak (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2001). Heidegger uses different terms such as “fore-having” and “fore-conception.” Gadamer favours his version of the concept of “prejudices” while Merleau-Ponty prefers to use the concept of “implicit understanding.” For the purposes of this article, the subtle distinctions between the different concepts are glossed over and the term “pre-understandings” has been selected as being generally acceptable to all.

Remain open to the meaning of the other person or text... This openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it... This kind of sensitivity involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings. (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 268–269)

Gadamer emphasises the role of interpretation in understanding and sees this occurring as a movement between the interpreter’s past and present. For Gadamer meanings can never be fixed and are always emergent, contextual and historical. There is always a vantage point which involves particular horizons of meaning. Performing the reduction therefore involves becoming aware of one’s current horizons:

The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up new horizons and so forth. (1975, p. 302)

Gadamer (1975) discusses how the philosopher (or researcher) seeks to strike a balance between keeping a scientific openness, attempting to escape from personal prejudices and being aware of their wordliness and historical-cultural embeddedness. He talks of having to “distinguish the true prejudices, by which we *understand*, from the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*” (1975, pp. 298–299). At the same time, he acknowledges the difficulty of separating out productive prejudices, if only because we are unconsciously influenced by our pre-understandings:

A person who believes he [*sic*] is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him. (1975, p. 360)

Gadamer’s solution is to “question and provoke” our pre-understandings. After asking the questions we should wait for the answer and keep open. Only in this way can we come to understand the prejudices we undoubtedly have.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) also questions the more transcendental directions of the reduction that have been seen by some as tending toward idealism. He prefers, instead, to ground the reduction in existential phenomenology: Our “effective involvement in the world is precisely what has to be understood” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xiv). In an often quoted statement, Merleau-Ponty is clear that the “most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (1945/1962, p. xiv).

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty accepts Husserl’s procedures and affirms the value of the epoché: “In order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it” (1945/1962, p. xiv). The presupposed bases of thought, he argues, “are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them.” (1945/1962, p. xiii). Merleau-Ponty concurs with Fink’s (one of Husserl’s assistants) characterisation of the reduction as “wonder” in the face of the world (Fink, 1995) Here, the ground for epistemology is the philosopher’s openness to being “astonished.”

Reduction does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis: it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world, and thus brings them to our notice. It, alone, is consciousness of the world, because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xii)

van Manen (2002) elaborates the idea thus:

The wonder of that thing takes us in, and renders us momentarily speechless . . . From this moment of wonder, a question may emerge that addresses us and that is addressed by us. It should animate one’s questioning of the meaning of some aspect of lived experience. It also should challenge the researcher to write in such a way that the reader of the phenomenological text is similarly stirred to the same sense of wondering attentiveness to the topic under investigation. (van Manen, 2002b)

In summary, philosophical understandings of the nature of the phenomenological attitude have varied in their emphasis, with the transcendental

dimensions developed by Husserl attracting controversy. However, all phenomenological philosophers concur on the need to restrain pre-understandings, to achieve openness, and to access a sphere of lived experience that has eluded traditional scientific research. At the very least, all would probably affirm the value of practising a *partial* reduction while being prepared to be transformed by “wonder in the face of the world.”

Applying the Reduction in Psychological Research

There is an important difference between philosophical reflection on life experience and the phenomenological, psychological researcher’s reflection practised in the analysis of descriptions of lived experience. In the former, just the philosopher’s reflections are involved in work on properly philosophical research problems. In the latter, the researcher engages other people and attempts to reflect on these research participants’ lived experiences based on interactions (such as interviews) with them which adds various layers of complexity. Therefore, it is necessary to modify the philosophers’ ideas when it comes to applying them to empirical psychological research (Giorgi, 1997, Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In this section, I look at suggestions from a number of different authors about how researchers might apply the phenomenological attitude in actual research practice.

In general, psychological authors advise researchers to adopt a stance of openness and active, reflective attention towards restraining pre-understandings (a stance which does not include a transcendental turn or pursuit). This modified form of the reduction is sometimes called *scientific phenomenological reduction* (Giorgi, 1997; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Within this reduction, the phenomenological attitude is one of empathic openness. In addition, some scholars explicitly recognise the concept of *reflexivity* and the need to critically interrogate the impact of researcher subjectivity. The phenomenological attitude being presented here is one which requires the researchers to “become fully and thoughtfully involved. It is as if one is engaged in a dance of moving forward and moving back: one steps closer and steps away, has an effect and is affected” (Halling and Goldfarb, 1991, p. 328).

Scientific Phenomenological Reduction

The phenomenological attitude is both a rigorous meditation and an active searching out of the processes and meanings of lived experience (Spiegelberg, 1960). At its core is a process of phenomenological *intuiting* in which the phenomenologist attempts to be open and to meet the phenomenon in as fresh a way as possible. This highly demanding operation takes time and demands discipline and layers of critical concentration. If this process can be achieved without the phenomenologist becoming too lost in the phenomenon, moments of deeper clarity and insight may result (Spiegelberg, 1986).

Giorgi (Giorgi, 1997, Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) identifies this attitude as being one where the researcher views the phenomenon “freshly” or with what he calls “disciplined naiveté”:

When we encounter familiar objects we tend to see them through familiar eyes and thus often miss seeing novel features of familiar situations. Hence, by understanding that the given has to be seen merely as a presentational something rather than the familiar “object that always is there,” new dimensions of the total experience are likely to appear. This is what is meant when phenomenologists say they want to experience things. (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 249)

Thus, in order to receive intuitions about meanings of lived experience, the researcher needs to place themselves within the reduction. “No work can be consider[ed] to be phenomenological if some sense of the reduction is not articulated and utilized” says Giorgi (1997, p. 240). However, since it is the activity of psychological subjectivity in which researchers are interested, as opposed to transcendental subjectivity, there are limits to the reduction. Only intentional objects of consciousness are reduced, not the acts—the conscious acts are considered realities through which human beings relate to the world (Giorgi, 1997, Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). For researchers to be fully present to the other person, their past knowledge regarding the phenomenon being experienced by the other needs to be held in abeyance, and existential claims concerning what the other person experiences must be resisted.

In other words, phenomenological research focuses on the presentational givenness (i.e. psychological reality) of lived experience without

claiming that the given really exists (placing into brackets the question of the reality of the objects of consciousness). Researcher's participants are thus assumed to exist while the objects of their experiences are bracketed and considered to be presences rather than reality. For example, a hallucination of a spirit can be accepted as "meaningful" to the person.

What is experienced is understood to be an experiential given to the person experiencing the object, the person is genuinely experiencing some given phenomenon, the claim that what is present to the person's consciousness actually exists in the way it is given is not affirmed... One makes no commitment to the existence of the given within the reduction. (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003, p. 249)

Elaborating the concept of the reduction, Dahlberg uses the term "bridling" in place of bracketing to capture the idea of the "restraining of one's pre-understanding in the form of personal beliefs, theories, and other assumptions that otherwise would mislead the understanding of meaning and thus limit the researching openness" (2006, p. 16). Bridling, she says is that "phenomenological attitude...[of] 'actively waiting' for the phenomenon, and its meaning(s), to show itself" (2006, p. 16). Arguing against seeing the reduction as a *method*, she presents it as an *activity* "characterized by a kind of 'non-willing' or 'dwelling' with the phenomenon" (2006, p. 16). Describing the "art of bridling," Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) emphasize the researcher's discipline:

Researchers should practise a disciplined kind of interaction... with their phenomena and informants, and "bridle" the event of understanding so that they do not understand too quickly, too carelessly or slovenly, or in other words, that they do not make definite what is indefinite. (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2008, p. 130)

Ashworth (1996) uses practical examples to identify the presuppositions which need to be bracketed to allow the lifeworld to emerge. He argues that at least three particular areas of presupposition need to be set aside: 1) Scientific theories, knowledge and explanations (e.g. from natural science, psychology and sociology), including beliefs in the objective reality of the natural/social world or in the priority of an inner realm. 2) The truth or falsity of claims being made by participants (i.e. external criteria against

which to validate life-world phenomena are set aside). 3) Personal views and experiences of the researcher. Ashworth also suggests there are clear limitations to what can be bracketed:

Certain assumptions are made which are certainly not at any stage bracketed. These include the belief that the research participant is a competent human being whose life-world is open to empathic understanding since it shares at least certain baseline meanings with our own life-world as investigators. (1996, pp. 21–22)

Here, Ashworth calls attention to pre-understandings which underlie interaction and communication and that the research encounter is not exempt from these. In contrast to pure philosophizing, psychological research work requires engagement with others, research participants, and the employment of practical activities in the course of research. Researchers do not bracket assumptions about the intersubjective world and the existence of a social reciprocity of perspective. Moreover, when researchers introduce their topic of research to participants as being “about” something there is a shared focus (carrying shared cultural meanings) which are not suspended.

Colaizzi (1973), among others, would contest Ashworth’s suggestion that personal views and experiences of the researcher should simply be set aside. He argues that researcher self-reflection constitutes an important first step of the research process. He advocates a process of “individual psychological reflection,” one in which the researcher brings to awareness preconceived biases and presuppositions while attempting first to formulate the research problem and directions, and later bracket these out from the analysis of participants’ descriptions. Here, the researcher’s own experience is used as data and variations of meaning are worked through. Revealing the researchers’ own pre-understandings, argues Colaizzi, not only provides the researcher with a starting point for reflection towards understanding others but also helps those reading the research.

Wertz (2005) similarly accepts a role for the researcher’s consideration of their own experience. He suggests the *epoché of the natural attitude* as one occasion where this can occur.

This second epoché and analyses that follow from it allow us to recollect our own experiences and to empathically enter and reflect on the lived world of

other persons in order to apprehend the meanings of the world as they are given to the first-person point of view. The psychologist can investigate his or her own original sphere of experience and also has an intersubjective horizon of experience that allows access to the experiences of others. (Wertz, 2005, p. 168).

What is under discussion is not whether researchers should engage a stance of active self-reflection but *when* and *how*. All phenomenological researchers would probably agree that the researcher needs to self-reflect, both at the beginning of the research and while analysing and evaluating the fruits of the research. A key question is whether reflection can (or should) occur while actively gathering data, such as when in the middle of an interview. One position taken here is to consider data gathering as being a straightforward activity carried out in the “natural attitude,” where the researcher is seen to have certain research (e.g., empathic, communicative) skills that are part of their everyday taken-for-granted work-world. By way of contrast, in the latter stages of data analysis a reflective, questioning attitude is employed. The researcher may even set aside the epoché and interrogate their data and findings, using external frames of reference (such as theory) to further explicate meanings. Other researchers propose that reflection can usefully occur within the data gathering phase, providing the researcher can embrace the dialectical tension that exists between practising the epoché and active reflection. A middle position acknowledges the inevitably incomplete nature of the reductive process while striving to use reflection *from within the reduction*.

Empathy, Openness and Reflexivity

Rather than getting caught up in questions about the exact degree and stage of reduction being practiced, it is perhaps more helpful to concentrate on the nature of the phenomenological attitude as a whole. Wertz (2005, p. 172) describes this phenomenological attitude as being an “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 (“coperforms” participant’s involvements) in their lived situation(s). 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 savors 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).

Churchill *et al.* (1998) similarly recommend an intuitive “*empathic dwelling*” as the first stage of a phenomenological method. In this initial stage, the researcher aims to stay with the participant's description, becoming ever-more open to the participant's experience and what is being communicated. In empathy, “*I participate in the other's positioning himself or herself from a unique perspective within a situation...* While maintaining one's own position as researcher, one gradually allows oneself to feel one's way into the other's experience” (Churchill *et al.*, 1998, p. 66). The empathic dwelling in this instance is enacted alongside the epoché where the researcher attempts to put aside his or her own understandings in order to see the world anew.

Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) further develop the idea of “openness” in their version of Reflective Lifeworld Research. They recommend the researcher adopts an “open discovering way of being” and develops a “capacity to be surprised and sensitive to the unpredicted and unexpected” (2008, p. 98). In their version of openness, “vulnerable engagement” and “disinterested attentiveness” are simultaneously present.

Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect, and certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility. To be open means to conduct one's research on behalf of the phenomenon. This... shows how important it is... not to decide beforehand upon the methods by which the phenomenon should be studied. (2008, p. 98)

Echoing these themes, van Manen explains how his version of the “hermeneutic reduction” is operationalized in research as “openness”:

One needs to reflect on one's own pre-understandings, frameworks, and biases regarding the (psychological, political, and ideological) motivation and the nature of the question, in search for genuine openness in one's conversational relation with the phenomenon. In the reduction one needs to overcome one's

subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations that may seduce or tempt one to come to premature, wishful, or one-sided understandings of an experience and that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomenon as it is lived through. (van Manen 2002c)

In my own phenomenological approach I, too, emphasise empathy and openness (Finlay, 2006a, 2006b). At the same time I value researchers' critical self-awareness of their own subjectivity, vested interests, predilections and assumptions and to be conscious of *how these might impact on the research process and findings* specifically in terms of how they may close down avenues of understanding. In other words, it is not enough simply to acknowledge and be aware of one's own pre-understandings and to somehow bracket these. The process is more complicated, paradoxical and layered. It is a state of constant striving: as the researcher brackets preconceptions, more arise at the level of awareness (Valle, King and Halling, 1989).

The challenge for the researcher is to critically and reflexively evaluate how these pre-understandings influence the research (be it at data gathering or analysis phases) and to devise ways of containing their seductive power.

Following the existential and hermeneutic lead of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, I suggest that one way the researcher can engage the phenomenon of interest is through an iterative and dialectical process of hermeneutic reflexivity (Finlay, 2003a). Reflexivity in this context is defined as the "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). Here, 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 and the ground is re-covered. And the "dance" steps begin once more...

Dancing between the Reduction and Reflexivity

The following three illustrations from my own research experience are intended to throw further light on this dialectical dance between the reduction and reflexivity. The examples have been chosen to show both the complexity of the reduction and the discipline required to put it into practice, particularly during the phase of research in which the phenomenon is initially accessed. As Merleau-Ponty acknowledges, “we constitute constituting consciousness by dint of rare and difficult efforts.” (1960/1964, p. 180). The examples also illustrate how the reduction is best seen as a stance or process, rather than a mechanical procedure; as an improvised movement *toward* and *between*, rather than a pre-established order of steps and routines. In addition, the illustrations show how layered, ephemeral and elusive the phenomenological attitude can prove to be in practice.

Example 1—Ann

This example describes a moment during an interview I carried out with a friend (Ann) about her lived experience of multiple sclerosis (Finlay, 2003b). In the extract below, taken from my reflexive diary, I describe reacting to a subtle, fleeting non-verbal gesture Ann used to describe her life world. That one gesture yanked me out of my usual taken-for-granted understandings about the nature of multiple sclerosis (gained in my training as an occupational therapist). With that one gesture she reminded me that I had drifted away from the proper attitude, slipping out of Husserl’s *epoché of the natural sciences* (1936/1970).

I remember the moment during the interview when I caught myself thinking, “I’ve heard this story before,” and then, suddenly, I realised that I hadn’t. Through that one gesture, Ann reminded me to adopt an open presence to her story as it unfolded. I needed to hear Ann’s story as her individual one and to hear the meaning, for her, of how multiple sclerosis was being lived. I needed to specifically bracket my medical-scientific pre-understandings of the condition in general terms in order to see anew. In other words, I needed to regain the discipline of the phenomenological attitude to try to return to the lifeworld.

In my research on exploring the lived experience of early stage multiple sclerosis, I interviewed Ann. She talked powerfully of how her relations with others were

under threat from her multiple sclerosis—specifically, from the loss of sensation in her hands. Poignantly, this impacted most on her relationships with her children.

Ann talked quite a bit about how the loss of sensation in her hand interfered with her daily functioning, but it took me a while to tune in. Initially, I fell into the trap of thinking about her experience and her loss of sensation in almost medical terms—I'd been looking at her body as an object. I even found myself thinking, 'well her disability is not that severe—its only partial loss of sensation and she still has some motor function'. Then she did something that yanked me into her life world...

She described the sense of almost panic which hit her when she suddenly realised she may not ever again be able to reach out to feel the "softness of her baby's skin properly." She gently caressed her own cheek and then reached out to caress the child imagined in front of her. She described this as doing the "mummy thing."

Those fleeting, imaginary, subtle caresses disclosed a profound understanding. Suddenly, I understood that I needed to tune into her bodily experience—specifically her feeling of being unable to connect with—being unable to love—her children. Without "sensation," she loses her ability to caress and hold and to express her love to her children. Intimate relations are disrupted as her ability to embody her loving presence is thwarted. A dynamic relation between body-world is revealed when Ann reaches out to touch—and be touched by—her children but discovers she cannot feel them. (Finlay, 2006a, p. 23)

Although I had been striving to be open to Ann's story, I realised I had only been partially successful. In that one moment, I saw that I had fallen into the trap of seeing Ann through my therapist eyes and regarding her neurological problems as being relatively mild. Seeing Ann's subtle gesture during the interview nudged me to listen and open myself up to Ann's own world. For Ann, her multiple sclerosis symptoms meant a major disruption that disconnected her from her world. Drifting away from the phenomenological attitude, I had shown a certain prejudice about the nature of her disability (which was based on my scientific knowledge of the likely course and prognosis of a disease).

Subsequent reflection on this pivotal moment has deepened my understanding. In focusing on Ann's body as a sensory-motor object, was I not also empathising with her own lifeworld, where she too had embraced such medicalised understanding? Ann was a physical therapist by profession and clinical understandings about her condition and prognosis were part of her experience. During the interview she described being alert to possible symptoms as she routinely checked her body each morning to

make sure the different parts were still functioning. Knowledgeable about the myelin sheaths of her peripheral nerves being eroded away, she herself viewed her own body with a medical gaze. She assessed her own body as she has assessed others and as others have assessed hers—Sartre’s (1958) notion of “being-for-others.” In describing her experience in these ways, it seems that Ann drew me into her lifeworld (replete with medicalised understandings) by speaking about her body as an object. However, it was necessary for me as a researcher to be able to shift, along with Ann, to other moments of her experience of multiple sclerosis in order to remain fully and freshly present to all its twists and turns.

Performing the epoché both during the interview and in my subsequent reflections, I was reminded to put aside my previous clinical understandings of multiple sclerosis and attend more closely to Ann’s own existential sense of embodiment. I was then enabled to see Ann’s ambivalent body-subject/body-object experience meant that her arm was something both “a-part from and a-part of” herself (Finlay, 2003b, p. 167) and that this experience was a significant dimension of her lifeworld.⁷

Engaging in reflexive analysis after the interview, I realised there was much that I was not bracketing in the process of exploring Ann’s lifeworld. My professional knowledge and background might have been the source of some prejudice, but it also gave me a platform from which to view Ann’s struggle and empathise. I understood more than a lay person might have done of her condition and experience. Further, I would not have been able to appreciate Ann’s therapist understandings had I not shared her professional background. I had the possibility of communicating with, empathising with and understanding Ann by virtue of our belonging to the same world (the world of therapy; the world of women). I was able to reflect Ann’s experience on the basis of a sharing common experience. As Husserl says: “A first step is explicitly to be vitally at one with the other person in the intuitive understanding of his [*sic*] experiencing” (1936/1970, p. 328).

My understanding of Ann came from more than a focus on tussling with my pre-understandings. While I had to *bracket* my therapist’s view of

⁷ Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty (1960/1964) argues that the key challenge of the phenomenological attitude is to slip constantly between naturalist and personalist attitudes: between nature and the world of the mind. Experience is rooted in the body that is both natural object and personalist subject.

multiple sclerosis I was, simultaneously, also being *open to* her experience of being a therapist and a mother. I needed to be open to her being a person as a whole. This mirrors Husserl's suggested stages of the reduction where bracketing of knowledge is followed by a process of examining the phenomenon in a fresh way that enables new understandings to emerge. The reduction is thus concerned with engaging phenomenological understanding as a whole, and not just eliminating pre-selected bits to be strategically bracketed out. The next example similarly shows this process.

Example 2—Pat

In this next example I sought to engage the reduction more fully by attempting to bracket my very being-in-the-world. Here I was not just reflexively bracketing bits of my knowledge and previous understandings, I was trying, instead, to bracket (or at least, “bridle”) my way seeing and hearing the world towards seeing it afresh. Specifically I tried to engage Husserl's *phenomenological psychological reduction* (1936/1970) endeavouring to experience the world as it presented itself to my participant. My hope was to experience something of the “astonishment” Husserl refers to in the following quotation: “As soon as one has progressed far enough in the reorientation of the epoché to see the purely subjective in its own self... one becomes more astonished at each step by the endless array of emerging problems and important discoveries to be made” (1936/1970, p. 169).

One such a moment occurred during my research with Pat, a friend and co-researcher. A childhood accident cost Pat her hearing, leaving her in the world of the profoundly deaf amidst the hearing for more than fifty years. Then, in 2005 she received a new bionic ear (cochlear implant), which once again allowed her to hear a rich range of sounds. Pat and I set out to explore collaboratively her disrupted and changing lifeworld over the months following this implant (Finlay and Molano-Fisher, 2008). We corresponded regularly over this period and I engaged some participant-observation when visiting her one weekend.

This visit with Pat took place at the start of 2006 when she was learning to hear once more. At this time she was having to learn how to pick up and distinguish sounds through using her “ears first” rather than relying on the interpretation of visual cues which she had done previously as a lip reader. She found herself confronting a bewildering babble in a new world that

was, as she put it, “so NOISY!” My reflexive research diary entries catch something of what she was going through as well as how her experience began to colour my own ways of perceiving:

Together we went for a walk in the woods. It was an extraordinary experience. Step by step, I found myself tuning into her world. We started playing a game. I would draw her attention to a noise: the sound of a bird singing, her dogs paws rustling up the leaves, a car passing, children laughing in the distance. It took a minute but she would eventually discriminate and hear the sound. “Oh, that’s what a xxx sounds like!” she’d say. Slowly but surely as she memorised each sound, a new world opened up for her. What a revelation!

Pat proved to be a quick learner. Then she turned the tables on me. “What’s that?,” she’d ask. Sometimes I’d be able to answer. At other times, I had no idea. I was hearing new sounds myself! Slowly, I discovered my own perception changing just as Pat’s was changing. Previously I would have thought our walk in the woods would have been wonderfully peaceful and quiet. Now, I was seeing/hearing the world differently. What a cacophony: birds, leaves rustling, cars, trains, voices Yes, it is an incredibly noisy world! I was reminded of Abram’s evocative phrase: “promiscuous creativity of the senses” (Abram, 1996, p. 58). Only now can I appreciate what he was saying.

Together, Pat and I engaged a voyage of discovery. For me, as for her, the learning was irreversible.

This seems a good example of achieving a stance of wonder . . . I went beyond my usual being. Yet did I leave myself behind? I don’t think so. I was there with Pat. [I was still experiencing myself as existing in the forest with Pat, I was just experiencing myself in a new way.] I wanted to connect with her; I wanted to empathise; I wanted to show her I was trying. I felt for her and I was fundamentally involved in our shared interaction.

For a brief moment during this participant observation, it felt as though I was experiencing the world through Pat’s ears.⁸ In this moment of reductive revelation, in which I had laid aside my habitual perceptions and

⁸) Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 234) draws our attention to the way that the “sight of sounds or the hearing of colours come about in the same way as the unity of the gaze through the two eyes.” By this he means that sight/sound is experienced through one’s whole sensory being. “Visual and auditory experiences . . . are pregnant one with the other, and their expressive value is the ground of the antepredicative unity of the perceived world.” (1962, p. 235).

modes of perceiving, I was able to empathise with, and so begin to explicate, Pat's own new "colourfully noisy" life worldly experience. I had left my world behind in order to enter into Pat's world. I attempted to *coperform* Pat's involvement in her lived experience. This sharing formed the basis of both what I reflected on afterwards and our eventual collaborative existential analysis of her lived experience: In particular, we recognised the challenges she faced having to re-orientate herself to what seemed like a radically different world. Her comfortably deaf-body which had represented her continuing perspective on the world now contained both an absence (of familiar limited sounds) and new unfamiliar sounds (Finlay and Molano-Fisher, 2008).

Reflecting on the encounter, it seems I stumbled upon the very moment of wonder the reduction seeks to achieve. There was a spiritual dimension to this moment with Pat, enabling me to grasp what Husserl might have had in mind when he likened the personal transformation needed in the reduction to a religious conversion. It is worth asking if in this special moment of experience, I approached Husserl's *transcendental phenomenological reduction*—his more radical version of the epoché where we stand "above the world... at the gate of entrance to the realm, never before entered" (1936/1970, pp. 152–153). On reflection, I believe that I had not left myself nor had I bracketed my whole being-in-the-world. I was still experiencing myself as existing in the forest with Pat. I was just experiencing myself in a new way, expanding my being-in-the-world. I was thus still in the *phenomenological psychological reduction* dancing between my experiencing and my empathy for Pat's experience, between my habitualities and fresh modes of being.

The distancing Husserl advises with his reductions seems at once to be an immersion in a new realm. But this world too has to be bracketed. It is after all just another perspective—not the definitive one. The researcher is thus engaged in exploring ever-increasing number of perspectives (variations) so as to gain deeper understandings of meanings. (For example, in my reflexive analysis, I was varying my old and new experiencing which gave me a way of understanding Pat's changing experience). Husserl recognises this point when he suggests,

(T)he perspectives combine in an advancing *enrichment of meaning* and a *continuing development of meaning*... To inquire into the... subjective manners of givenness, i.e., into *how* an object... exhibits itself as being and being-such,

we enter a realm of more and more involved and very remarkable expositions. (1936/1970, p. 158–159).

Example 3—Kenny

My third example similarly shows this continuing development of meaning that can occur as a researcher moves between engaging the reduction and being reflexive about the process. This next example illustrates my use of three different Husserlian reductions: the *epoché of the natural sciences*, the *phenomenological psychological reduction* and the *eidetic reduction*.

This illustration comes from narrative case study research 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 participant on this occasion. In the following quotation, 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 also attempt to reflexively interrogate my usual understandings in an effort to see afresh the meanings of his anxiety. (The extract below has been created from the interview transcript and the reflexive notes—set in italics—that 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 it’s 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 ‘re-member’ is significant here. Remembering is not just a cognitive function: it’s about reiterating responses in the body: we re-member.]

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 ‘re-membered’ 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. (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 that 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. This notion of empathy returns us to Husserl's foundational argument that intersubjectivity is present prior to any encounter with another and it is this very intersubjectivity which allows empathy. Importantly, this intersubjectivity is embodied: "In order to establish a mutual relationship between myself and an Other, in order to communicate something to him, a Bodily relation . . . must be instituted . . . In empathy I participate in the other's positing" (Husserl, 1928/1989, pp. 176–177). Here Husserl recommends the phenomenologist mentally transpose themselves into the other's world. Through this "coupling" or "pairing," a process of transfer occurs where one coperforms the other's meaning acts and so grasps their meanings.

This process of mentally transposing oneself into another's world 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, in addition to striving to empathise through imaginal self-transposition, I needed to bracket my previous understandings of mental health problems and the meaning of non-verbal gestures such as rocking and holding oneself. I had to let go my general understandings in order to be open to emerging understandings of his particular responses and meanings. In order to facilitate this changed perspective, I needed to reflect (reflexively) on its meanings and my role in constituting the meanings. As Husserl advises, "Within the epoché we are free consistently to direct our gaze exclusively at this life-world or at its a priori essential forms; . . . by . . . shifting our gaze we can direct it at the correlates which constitute its 'things' . . . i.e., at the multiplicities of manners of givenness" (1936/1970, p. 174).

After the interview, having gained a changed perspective, I needed to reflect on and clarify Kenny's experience. During this analytical phase I tried to engage Husserl's *eidetic reduction* or intuition of essences using the procedure of free imaginative variation.⁹ For example, I sought to grasp the essence of what the concrete behavioural example of non-verbal holding/self-hugging meant to Kenny. I asked questions and imaginatively varied

⁹ Importantly, this Husserlian method involves free imaginative variation *from within* the reduction. This imaginative transposal and variation is not merely a mental technique, it is a radical 'self-meditation' (Fink, 1995).

possible meanings to distinguish what seemed to be the essential or invariant meanings (particular and peculiar to Kenny's lifeworld) as opposed to incidental ones. Was my sense that he was trying to hold himself together revealed in other gestures or words? Are there instances where his holding gesture is a self-protective or self-nurturing one? As my analysis progressed it seemed that part of the structure of Kenny's experience was that he sought to isolate himself in his anxiety for fear of hurting others as well as keeping himself safe. So I asked: Did he only "loose it" when he was with other people?; Would he still "loose it" if others intruded into his bedroom?; and so forth. Reflecting through imaginative variation allowed me to see the pressures Kenny faced were primarily to do with the presence of other people. His bedroom was a sanctuary only because he could be alone there.

My research encounter with Kenny raised several issues relating to the use of the phenomenological attitude in research practice. Firstly, it highlights how the process of engaging the epoché is intertwined with reflection which can occur both during and after the research encounter. It is a moot point whether this reflection is a necessary part of the epoché or a separate process. Could I have possibly engaged my empathy habitually with little reflexive orientation? Or is my habitual empathic response frequently twinned with reflection? I remain unsure, but I suspect the process of reflecting is separate and distinct from the stance of reductive openness. For one thing, researchers need to be reflexive to ensure their reflections are also subject to the reduction. In this sense, the reduction is more a stance or tone which permeates the phenomenological reflection and research process as a whole.

Secondly, questions are raised about the adequacy of the reductions I performed. The fact that I engaged a process of reflexive bodily empathy reveals limits in the pre-understandings I was bracketing. It is significant that I retained my assumptions about intersubjectivity and the possibility of gaining empathetic understanding (Ashworth, 1996). I was also falling back on certain accepted psychological knowledge positions: for example, that non-verbal behaviours have certain meanings which can be interpreted. At the same time I used my therapist skills and experience to draw Kenny out. Here, I would support the position taken by both Gadamer and Heidegger that the understanding I am able to achieve is founded upon my having particular "fore-conceptions."

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? The answer to this question is both yes and no. The fact that a research interview was involved (as opposed to philosophical reflection) means that certain practical and social pre-understandings, required for practices in the vocational field of the psychological research of others' experiences, were necessarily pulled into the equation. However, it was important to (critically and reflexively) attend to the likely impact of these pre-understandings on the research. In the case of this research, my therapist/psychology background are so much a part *of* me (and the habitualities of my "natural attitude"). I could not have maintained them a-part *from* me in my psychological practice 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?

As I sought to engage the reflexive reduction in all three research encounters with Anne, Pat and Kenny, I had to be constantly vigilant. It would have been all too easy to let my personal attitudes or previous experience and mode of being impinge. I struggled to remain open to my participants' experiences, dwelling with them, in order to allow deeper, varied meanings emerge. In my work with Ann, the reflexive reduction involved my being critically aware of, and trying to set aside, my previous clinical understandings of disability and the impact of multiple sclerosis. At the same time, I needed to open myself to other unanticipated possibilities, such as Ann's experience of being a loving mother. With Pat, in the second example, my perceptions were radically transformed as I momentarily experienced something of Pat's "noisy" world. In the Kenny interview, I utilised reflexive embodied empathy to reflect on our intersubjective communication and meanings. In order to see Kenny, I had to let go of my assumptions about his non-verbal responses while simultaneously reflecting on my role in co-constituting meanings. In each case, the process of engaging reflexively with the moment helped facilitate the transformed perspective required for the reduction—even if the reduction achieved was partial, flawed and could not be sustained.

Conclusion

The phenomenological attitude has been explicated as the process of retaining an empathic openness to the world while reflexively identifying and restraining pre-understandings so as to engage phenomena in themselves. Past knowledge is both restricted and used to interrogate the meanings that come to be, in order for the researcher to be more fully open to the research encounter.

While scholars and researchers debate the nature of the reduction and the extent it can or should be applied, most (if not all) phenomenologists agree on its importance and on the challenges involved in achieving it. In research terms, the process of cultivating this special, attentive attitude of openness and wonder requires discipline, practice and patience. A continuous iterative struggle is involved to become aware of, and then manage, the impact on the research of lingering pre-understandings and evolving understandings. The reward comes with extraordinary, though fleeting, moments of disclosure where the phenomenon reveals something new about itself and understanding acquires greater depth.

In addition to outlining the philosophical basis of the concept of the phenomenological attitude, this article has explored ways of engaging the reduction reflexively in practice specifically in the initial phases of gaining access to the research phenomenon through interviews and being with others. Dancing between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight, the researcher experiences contradictory and paradoxical pulls. They must simultaneously embody detachment from lived experience and involvement in it. Naïve openness and self-aware criticality become intertwined—a dialectical dance indeed. The challenge for the researcher is to remain focused on the phenomenon being studied while both reining in and reflexively interrogating their own understandings. The aim, always, is to see through fresh eyes, to understand through embracing new modes of being. Such moments of personal transformation and wonder, while invariably elusive, can prove extraordinarily powerful. For an instant or two, the researcher shares the rapture of the dancer: the sinuous embrace of something elemental, unexpected and almost beyond the possibility of being put into words.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to Karin Dahlberg for taking the time to read an earlier draft and comment so wisely, and to Russell Walsh for nudging me to theorise the concept of reflexivity more deeply. I am especially indebted to Fred Wertz for his editorial comments and generous teaching, both of which have challenged me to embrace more nuanced understandings of Husserlian philosophy.

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