



The Interview: Data Collection in Descriptive Phenomenological Human Scientific Research*

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Abstract

In this article, interviewing from a descriptive, phenomenological, human scientific perspective is examined. Methodological issues are raised in relation to evaluative criteria as well as reflective matters that concern the phenomenological researcher. The data collection issues covered are 1) the selection of participants, 2) the number of participants in a study, 3) the interviewer and the questions, and 4) data collection procedures. Certain conclusions were drawn indicating that phenomenological research methods cannot be evaluated on the basis of an empiricist theory of science, but must be critiqued from within a phenomenological theory of science. Some reflective matters, experienced by the phenomenological researcher, are also elaborated upon.

Keywords

phenomenology, interviews, qualitative research, data collection

Introduction

The interview has become the main data collection procedure closely associated with qualitative, human scientific research. Kvale (1983, 1994, & 2009 with Brinkmann) has written extensively on this subject matter and his books and articles on interviewing are probably the most cited in the entire field of qualitative research. In fact, Kvale has become a contemporary authority when discussing qualitative interviews. However, Kvale writes

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within the realm of a general, qualitative methodology; meaning that his take on interviewing is not always in line with interviewing as it applies to a specific method, such as the descriptive phenomenological psychological method. In other words, even though Kvale's general (methodological) arguments for the interview hold true, there are some specific issues that need to be clarified in order to see how data collection and data analysis are interrelated in relation to descriptive phenomenological research. As Giorgi (2009, p. 122) points out, "There are many books (for example, Mishler 1986; Kvale, 1996) with advice on how to conduct an interview, but none happens to be written with explicitly phenomenological criteria in mind." Hence, Kvale's work should perhaps be seen as a general guide to qualitative interviewing and not a specific guide on how to conduct interviews from a Husserlian phenomenological, human scientific perspective.

As a university teacher I have noticed that students who want to do phenomenological research often conduct interviews that are not consistent with phenomenological criteria. Such research demonstrates what Giorgi has criticized as "mixed discourse" (Giorgi, 1994, p. 192) or shifting philosophical positions "mid-stream" (Giorgi, 2006, p. 317), already in the data collection phase. Usually it is not entirely the students' fault; they are confused by inconsistencies in the literature on qualitative methodology.¹ The most common error made by students is the mistaken assumption that qualitative research is *one method*. Often (even if advised not to do so), students mix hermeneutic phenomenology, descriptive phenomenology, grounded theory, and content analysis without realizing that doing so is fallacious due to the incompatibility of the respective methods' underlying philosophical premises. Now, there are some general arguments that hold true for the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methodology; however, combining qualitative methods is analogous to the common expression of mixing oranges and apples. Pedagogically we are thus challenged to confront and correct some students' common and fallacious assumption that qualitative research refers to a single unified method.

Phenomenological, human scientific researchers tend to choose the interview due to their interest in the meaning of a phenomenon as it is lived by other subjects. Collecting data solely from oneself would be more

¹ See for example Giorgi (2006) for a more comprehensive review of some of the inconsistencies found in different phenomenological methods as used for human scientific purposes.

of a philosophical endeavor (see for example, Giorgi, 2009, pp. 95–96). The basic issue here is that we as phenomenological researchers are interested in the subjectivity of other persons and thus it seems logical that we would want to get a description of such subjectivity. Collecting descriptions from others is also an attempt at a discovery of a human scientific meaning of a particular phenomenon. Phenomenologists have always argued for the importance of examining not only how a phenomenon appears to an individual subject but how the phenomenon is present to an intersubjective community (Zahavi, 2001a). Phenomenology has been practiced without ever diminishing the efforts made by the natural sciences. In other words, both the natural sciences and human sciences are valuable in terms of explaining and understanding a phenomenon. The chief criterion in determining what research method will be used should be the initial research question (based on research interest or research problem), not tradition or norms. In addition, the true experiment is based upon the idea that the subject (i.e., researcher) observes an object. The interview, in contrast, has its foundation in the presence of a subject as researcher to another subject. Thus, even on a superficial level, the relationship subject-object is different from subject-subject, making the evaluative, methodological criteria of the research procedure different as well. Due to this difference, the phenomenological, human scientist's challenges throughout the entire research process will also be very different from that of the natural scientist's. And most important of all, this difference demands a distinctly different methodology based on a distinctly different theory of science. Now, it gets more complicated than subject-object versus subject-subject as one gets into, for example, specific issues in how the experiment is used in natural scientific psychological research and how the interview is used in phenomenological psychological research.

In order for phenomenological research to achieve the same rigorous quality as natural scientific research, it is important that the research process be methodologically articulated in such a manner that data collection and data analysis are both seen as part of a single, unified process with the same underlying theory of science. Hence, if one is following Husserlian descriptive phenomenological philosophy as a basis for a phenomenological theory of science, both the data collection and the data analysis need to follow descriptive phenomenology in order to achieve rigor. Of course, one can do qualitative research in other ways, but in order to meet all the criteria of science, one needs to consider the consistency of method following

the same logic that is part of the same theory of science. Likewise it is essential to understand that one needs to adopt a different strategy when doing science in contrast to doing philosophy (Giorgi, 1997, 2006, 2009). In other words, one cannot just take a philosophical method and use it for scientific purposes, because a philosophical method is developed for philosophical purposes, not scientific ones (Giorgi, 1997, 2009).

The purpose of the following essay is to outline methodological concerns regarding data collection, with a specific focus on the interview in the context of Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological psychological method. Even though the interview will be my primary focus, I find it essential to also provide the methodological context in which interviewing takes place. I have structured this essay using subheadings that are usually associated with the method section concerning data gathering (in a scientific study). I have also provided the reader with the traditional terminology of a method section, as often used in natural scientific approaches, in order to provide a fruitful comparison in terms of theory of science with mainstream psychology. I have chosen not to address the ethical considerations relevant to data collection, since I do consider the ethical issue a distinct question deserving of a study in its own right. Now before proceeding to a consideration of the typical categories of a method section (concerned with data collection), let us first take a look at the overall research question. The aim is to show the essential relationship between the overall research question and the data collection procedures. I will use one of my own phenomenological psychological studies on the lived persistent meaning of early emotional memories (see for example, Englander, 2007) as an example throughout this paper. In the last section of this paper, I will reflect on certain parts of one of the interviews from this study in order to raise some important questions in terms of how we approach our reflective, pedagogical strategies when teaching interviewing and data collection from a phenomenological perspective.

The Overall Research Question

The initial phase of the process in phenomenological research begins with acknowledging that there is a need to understand a phenomenon from the point of view of the lived experience in order to be able to discover the meaning of it. Hence the purpose of the research is formulated in which the researcher aims at the discovery of the meaning of a particular phe-

nomenon. One can now easily see how such a phenomenological purpose is different from, for example, a mainstream natural scientific psychological experiment in which causality (or a correlation in terms of a statistical relationship) between the independent and the dependent variable is sought and in which pre-established hypotheses are verified and/or falsified. Another comparison, the qualitative method of grounded theory is founded upon the philosophical premises of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (see for example, Corbin & Strauss, 1990) as well as empiricism, making the focus on such a study congruent with its philosophical base. Thus, the researcher who attempts to study a phenomenon must clearly understand the specific philosophical premises underlying each research method. These premises shape every aspect of a method, from formulation of the research question to data collection and analysis. To use an example from one of my own phenomenological studies, a research question can be phrased in the following manner: *What is the lived persistent psychological meaning of early emotional memories?* Hence, in a phenomenological study the research question focuses on discovering the meaning of a phenomenon.

Selection of Participants—Sampling Method

The selection of participants is the initial step in the data gathering process. Giorgi (1997, 2009) identifies four criteria for qualitative or quantitative scientific psychological research; that is, scientific research, in relation to the knowledge obtained, should be: Systematic, methodical, general, and critical. In relation to the issue of selection of participants, I will focus primarily upon the last two (i.e., general and critical). Note that I am not extending Giorgi's scientific criteria to the actual selection process of the participants; however, I am extending the theoretical discussion in order to make a fruitful comparison to other modes of inquiry. Perhaps such a discussion will enable us to clarify some of the differences between the empirical and the phenomenological theory of science. Hence, Giorgi's criteria do not apply to the process of the selection of the participants, but to the knowledge gained from the research. In other words, the actual selection of the participants does not prohibit the knowledge obtained from being general and critical. To clarify further, 1) it is the results that are general, not the participants themselves, and 2) it is the researcher that needs to be critical, not the participants. However, focusing on *general* and *critical*, I hope to clarify

the *interrelation* between data gathering and evaluation of the results (showing the essential aspects of a method that is self-consistent) and thus to provide a meaningful comparison to quantitative psychological research.

Let us start with what *Selection of Participants* means for natural scientific, quantitative psychological researchers. The general (i.e., generalizability) of the results is somehow related to *the who*² (e.g., usually associated with biological qualities, personality, and/or social categories) that was a part of the study and the evaluation of the generality of the results relates to the process of how *the who* of the study was selected. In mainstream psychological research, this section consists of a description of what type of *sampling method* was used. *Sampling* stems directly from the idea that the sample can be statistically related to the population at large, that is, the sample should be representative of the population.

There are many different types of sampling methods available for the quantitative, psychological researcher. However, to guarantee as much as possible that the representativeness of the sample is indicative of the general population, random sampling is viewed as being more superior (even though convenient sampling methods exist as an option). A perfect random sampling of the population is obviously impossible for the quantitative psychologist; nevertheless, just like other forms of research (such as qualitative methods), *perfection* is not a criterion for being able to conduct legitimate scientific research (Giorgi, 2009). What is important for quantitative, natural scientific psychology is to aim for representativeness. The reason is that the evaluative statistical criteria, vis-à-vis *external validity*, depend upon good sampling procedures. Thus, in quantitative research, being critical of the general is seen in the relation between sampling procedures and results. The critical question to be answered by quantitative researcher in terms of selection of participants is thus: *Does the subject belong to the population that I am studying?*

But let us change research question so it will become phenomenological. The phenomenological focus would be to start off by asking the general question: “What is it like?” (Giorgi, 2009; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Nagel,

² From a phenomenological perspective there is not a “who” in the same sense that there is a “what”, making some of the reasoning in mainstream psychological research questionable to begin with. For a more elaborative account on this aspect see, for example, Zahavi (2009).

1974), compared to the general quantitative question of “How much?” and/or “How many?” This fundamental difference in itself also demands another perspective on the issue of evaluative criteria and thus another take on the issue of “representativeness”. First of all, the most obvious difference between these questions (i.e., qualitative versus quantitative) directly shows that statistics will not be involved in the phenomenological critical evaluation in relation to the selection of the participants. The phenomenological researcher is not primarily interested in knowing how many or how often one has had a particular experience, although such information might present itself in the data (Giorgi, 2009). In other words, one has to ask what “representativeness” means for the qualitative, phenomenological perspective, similar to other, traditional evaluative criteria such as, for instance, validity and reliability (see, Giorgi, 1988). In phenomenological research, representativeness does not apply until the general structure of the phenomenon is worked out (in the fourth step of Giorgi’s method) and thus the results of such a study cannot be evaluated on the basis of a sampling method. In other words, we aim for a general knowledge about the phenomenon and we know that people will be able to participate in the general structure, however, we do not know who they are (i.e., we do not know about the distribution). Hence, when it comes to selecting the subjects for phenomenological research, the question that the researcher has to ask themselves is: *Do you have the experience that I am looking for?*

In a sense then, our task will be to find and select participants who report having had a specific experience(s) of the phenomenon. This means that there is some, at least vague, idea from the researcher beforehand what the phenomenon is all about and this is legitimate. In other words, the researcher has a general sense of the expected parameters of the phenomenon, and an interest in the phenomenon. However the data may transcend what the researcher thinks he/she knows about the phenomenon, and in fact the researcher wants to suspend pre-understandings in order to discover the meaning of the phenomenon. The discoveries made, using the descriptive phenomenological attitude, later in the data analysis, will reveal new nuances (and perhaps challenge old notions) that would prove essential for the structure of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the difficulty of finding participants for a study is probably more of the real issue than anything else (depending on the phenomenon). Interviews can take one to two hours with each participant; alternatively, written descriptions

can be gathered from participants, and these tend to be more concise (Giorgi, 2009).

Number of Participants in a Study—Sample Size

The size of the sample is also of vital interest for a natural scientific, quantitative methodology in mainstream psychology. Qualitative methods as such must adopt different data gathering and analytic strategies than quantitative methods. However, due to the fact that a large sample size is seen (even in the eyes of a layperson) as a matter of fact in order for a study to be perceived as a legitimate scientific activity, the question of the size of the sample has turned into an alleged and persistent problem. As Kvale (1994, p. 165) puts it, “To the common question ‘How many interview subjects do I need?’, the answer is simply, ‘Interview so many subject that you find out what you need to know.’” Although I do not fully agree with the answer that Kvale provides, in a general way, I can sympathize with his point. A better general answer should be that the question (i.e., “how many?”) is irrelevant due to the fact that the research is qualitative and not quantitative. However, it is essential to understand the common misconception that a large sample size is a prerequisite for being able to generalize the results to the population at large. This is the fallacy we need to pedagogically respond to in order for our students to understand the developing phenomenological theory of science. As in the previous section on sampling method, we find ourselves back to the differences between quantitative and qualitative, phenomenological research in the selection of the participants.

Just like the sampling method, the sample size corresponds in quantitative research with the representativeness of the results to the population at large. Hence, generalizability of the results is the goal, and generalizability need not rely upon statistics. Now, if one can achieve the goal of representativeness and generalizability from a small number of research participants, then a qualitative method such as phenomenology can meet this general scientific criterion as well as a statistically-based approach. In fact historically much of the foundational research in the field of psychology was conducted with small numbers of subjects. Central figures in the development of psychology such as Freud, Piaget, and Skinner developed their theories based on research involving a limited number of subjects

and without dependence upon statistical analysis (Giorgi, 2009; Kvale, 1994, Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). One then has to ask the more fruitful question: What is the difference between generality in relation to meaning versus facts? In other words, one cannot assume naively that the generalizability of quantitative and qualitative results are both build upon a quantitative principle of “how many?” Breadth research, such as the quantitative, depends upon a large sample size for prediction of, for example, how many people have experienced a phenomenon (e.g., How many have experienced the lived persistent meaning of early emotional memories?). Once again, the quantitative study, in such a case, tries to answer the question of “how many?” On the other hand, if a researcher has a qualitative purpose and a qualitative research question, he or she seeks knowledge of the content of the experience, often in depth, to seek the meaning of a phenomenon, not “how many” people who have experienced such phenomena. Hence, one can clearly see that the different purposes of the research (being quantitative or qualitative phenomenological) also determine the differences in procedures for evaluating the generality of the results in relation to how many participants needed for a study.

The phenomenological method in human science recommends that one uses at least three participants, obviously not because that the number three corresponds with a statistical analysis but because one or two subjects would be too difficult for the researcher to handle in terms of their own imagination (Giorgi, 2009). Although we are not interested in “how many?” who have had a particular experience, for the purpose of comparison, we could take note on how many times the phenomenon makes its presence in the description (Giorgi, 2009, p. 198). As Giorgi (2009, pp. 198–199) points out, “Research based upon depth strategies should not be confused with research based upon sampling strategies.” Hence, one could also use five or twenty participants for that matter; however, it would most likely mean more work for the researcher and better appreciation for variation of the phenomenon, rather than better generality of the results. Nevertheless, what does it mean to generalize the results of a phenomenological study? Husserl’s phenomenology is build upon the notion of the possibility of intersubjectivity (Zahavi, 2001a, 2001b) and essences that are eidetic and thus generalizations spring from the meaning-structure (an eidetic achievement) of a phenomenon (as discovered in the fourth step of the analysis in Giorgi’s human scientific descriptive phenomenological

method). For example, one could generalize the meaning of the phenomenon of, for example, “the lived persistent meaning of an early emotional memory” to other people who have had that experience, due to the fact that the meaning-structure of the phenomenon is eidetically constituted. The search for the essential structure of the phenomenon (which is the results) involves the use of imaginative variations and the phenomenological human scientific reduction in order to achieve nomothetic, descriptive results, that is, the invariant meaning-structure for the phenomenon. The best way to pedagogically show how this is possible is to give an example of a general structure. Here is an example of a general structure derived from three subjects on the phenomenon “the lived persistent meaning of an early emotional memory”:

In the context of an early emotional situation in which a person’s emotional equilibrium has been significantly challenged, a person incorporates the meaning of a present object as a personal value constituting a foundation of one’s emotional life. The meaning of the object is perceived by the person as a constitutive of his or her emotional life and is fully accepted as part of the permanent perception of self that is frequently relived and never challenged. The early emotional situation is vividly remembered throughout life in similar or analogous emotional challenging situations in which the meaning of the object is present. The lived persistent meaning of an early emotional memory is revealed by the person’s motivation to go to extraordinary efforts throughout life to maintain his or her emotional equilibrium using the meaning of the object as a thematic foundation for his or her emotional coping strategy. To maintain one’s emotional equilibrium and to continue perceiving one’s self as whole, the person structures daily activities as well as life-long goals in conjunction with the emotional coping strategy (based on the meaning of the object). The meaning of the object is directly used or avoided (as an emotional coping strategy) in real and potential situations in which a person’s emotional equilibrium is, or could be, challenged. (Englander, 2007, p. 189)

Now, I will not depict this structure and pinpoint all the details relating to the constituents since I have done this elsewhere (Englander, 2007) and doing so would be to switch topics to data analysis. However, reading through the structure as a whole, one can see in the results that the researcher has used the human scientific phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation in order to critically seek the invariant structure;

which also includes varying empirical aspects such as, for example, possible social, personality, and/or biological factors vis-à-vis the structure. In other words, I invite the intersubjective, critical other here. When reading the structure, can I see a possibility of, for example, cultural background of the participants that might steer the results in a certain direction? The purpose was to capture and describe the structure (in this case the psychological meaning-structure) of the phenomenon so that it is general. Of course, if data was collected in another part of the world, the structure might change, however, this is the problem of all scientific research and not just an issue for phenomenological, qualitative research.

Note in the above structure how the language tries to remain generic in relation to the psychological perspective. By being critical (i.e., by using the phenomenological reduction and imaginative variations) one can bracket assumptions that are associated with an already established theoretical perspective in psychology and instead move towards a more generic psychology. The meaning of the phenomenon then has plausible generality to other individuals who have experienced the same, or perhaps a similar phenomenon. In addition, the critical evaluation of the general should stem from the same intersubjective level and cannot be done by, for example, research participants who are not trained in phenomenology or external judges looking at a particular aspect of the research process (Giorgi, 2006). In sum, Giorgi's method is nomothetic (although the method can be used for idiographic purposes if the meaning of the person is the aim and not the meaning of the phenomenon).

In general, descriptive phenomenological psychology, using a qualitative method, tries to identify the essential structure of a phenomenon. The process of selecting the participants and number of participants differ from mainstream natural scientific psychology mainly due to that the method rest upon a different theory of science and thus signifies a different epistemological purpose. I am suggesting that the issue of representativeness is not a relevant issue in relation to the selection of participants or how many participants one needs in the same sense as it is in quantitative research. As should be obvious at this point, both natural scientific and human scientific studies are needed because they serve different purposes, that is, the attempt is to answer a different type of research question. Hence, the evaluation of research should remain on the same intersubjective level, that is, within the same theory of science.

The Interviewer and the Questions—Instrumentation

The natural scientific subheading *instrumentation* in a traditional research report can be traced to two specific dichotomies in the phenomenological theory of science, that of “measurement versus meaning” and “independent observer versus participant observer” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 71). The bottom line (as I have already mentioned in the introduction) is that getting a description from another, in terms of an interview, is a subject-subject relation and not a subject-object (i.e., object as “thing-like” or physical object) relation as within the natural sciences. The natural scientific method was developed based on the investigation of a thing and phenomenology does not look at consciousness or the other person as a thing, nor does it strive to make them “thing-like.” With the introduction of instrumentation in natural scientific psychology, (and I would include, in a certain sense, even surveys and psychological tests here) the hope was to become more objective by changing the initial relation in psychology from subject-subject to subject-object. By doing so, at least in theory, the result was that the participant became forced to act according to an object (according to the instrumentation), which in fact objectified the research participant into the measurable (i.e., how long, how much, etc.). The result of such doing made psychological knowledge very narrow and limited, as determined by what was measurable. The instrumentation guaranteed an independent observer, although at the expense of losing valuable non-measurable psychological qualities. Copying natural scientific methodology meant rigor for mainstream psychological science; however, it also meant a de-personalized psychology, that is, a loss of the subject-subject relation. To use Zahavi’s (2005) phenomenological analysis of the self, one can say that mainstream psychology has lost the participant’s experiential self.

Phenomenological psychology operates on the basis of the relation subject-subject in terms of praxis and in a certain extent also in terms of research; however, in research the subject-phenomenon (i.e., mixed object) is also of importance. Note that the term object is not referred to “thing-like” (i.e., physical object), but is a mix between ir-real and real. In other words, there needs to be some clarification of what is meant to be a participant observer,³ i.e., conducting an interview, as opposed to be involved

³ Note that participant observer is not meant in a traditional sense as it applies to data collection in anthropological, ethnographic research or grounded theory research, but instead is meant in a more general sense as a contrast to independent observer.

in counseling or clinical work, for instance. In praxis, the individual becomes important whereas in the research situation the phenomenon has the higher priority. In this sense, the phenomenological researcher shifts from subject-subject relation (even though this relation still exists and has to be acknowledged in the actual interviewing situation) to a subject-phenomenon relation. As a phenomenological researcher I am present to the research participant as someone who reports having lived the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenon is the object of investigation, not the person, although obviously, a person is required to describe the phenomenon. Hence research is an occasion to become acquainted with the phenomenon, not an attempt to become acquainted first and foremost with the person in all his or her complexity. In a clinical psychological situation encountering the person is the goal; in phenomenological research the aim is to encounter the phenomenon via the person's description. In sum, during the interview the researcher will have to shift between being present to the phenomenon under investigation and being present to the subject-subject relation.⁴ One can make a comparison to the shift of presence involved in the figure-ground perception in Gestalt psychology. Hence, the bottom line of human implementation in a phenomenological sense is thus what Husserl calls intuition (or presence).

The questions that are part of a phenomenological interview should meet the criteria of description (Giorgi, 2009). In fact, in a technical sense, it is not a traditional question that initiates the interview but the interviewer who asks the participant for a description of a situation in which the participant has experienced the phenomenon. Asking for a situation is vital since the discovery of the meaning of a phenomenon (later in the data analysis) needs to have been connected to a specific context in which the phenomenon has been experienced. A situation is not an objective time related situation (like an experiment), but an experientially determined concept that could range from, for instance, a few seconds to years. Also, the actual situation for different participants will also be different. This is also what separates the traditional experiment in psychological research from phenomenological research (i.e., the experiment is the same situation for all research participants). It is not the empirical situation that is of

⁴) Obviously there is also a subject-ethics relation involved in being a researcher. However, as mentioned above, I have chosen not to elaborate on ethical issues in this paper.

interest to the phenomenological psychological researcher but the meaning of the phenomenon, however, the situation provides a context and meanings are context dependent.

The first question one should ask to the participant is: Can you please describe as detailed as possible a situation in which you experienced “a phenomenon.” If we had the general psychological phenomenon of *emotional memory*, for example, we would ask the participant: *Can you describe a situation in which you remembered something emotional.* The remaining questions should follow the response of the interviewee with a focus on the phenomenon being researched. Hence, and once again, interviewing from a phenomenological perspective means the ability to shift presences within a single mode of consciousness; that is, shifting between the subject-subject relation (following the responses in the interview) and the subject-phenomenon relation (that is, the questions should be geared towards the research phenomenon).

However, more specific research projects, although departing from the same type of initial question, requires more of what Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) calls a semi-structured interview. Now I find the term semi-structured interviewing at times to be confusing for certain students because I have seen many interpret this in the sense that they should be overly prepared and consequently work out a dozen or so questions before a phenomenological interview. Such attempts have instead resulted in fallaciously “leading the participant” instead of “directing the participant” (see Giorgi, 2009, p. 123). If we take our example above, using the phenomenon of *the lived persistent meaning of an early emotional memory*, it becomes apparent that this phenomenon requires two distinct questions and thus the interview becomes semi-structured. The first question here would be to ask for a description of a situation in which the participant remembered something emotional from early childhood and when the interviewer and the interviewee experienced this main question as being explored, the follow up question would be what lived effect this memory has had on their life. Now there are many questions and asking for clarifications that are spontaneous in between these two questions, however, these are following the responses of the interviewee. These two questions are the ones that make up the semi-structured interview to be able to get the information necessary for this particular phenomenon. In the following section I will give some examples from one of these lengthier interviews.

The Interview—Data Collection Procedures

There are, in general, two ways of collecting data if one wants information about the lived experience of a phenomenon from another person. First it is the traditional face-to-face interview, and secondly, one can ask for a written (or recorded) account of the experience (Giorgi, 2009). There is no prescriptive quality to a good interview, however there is one main criterion, which is, according to Giorgi (2009, p. 122): “What one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through.” The face-to-face interview is often longer and thus richer in terms of nuances and depth. The shorter written descriptions are useful for undergraduate research projects or workshop material. Although one could extend the amount of subjects in collecting shorter description (for the sake of practicing using the method) to compensate for the flavor of the many nuances usually gained in the longer face-to-face interview. Note that the motivation to increase the number of subjects is not due to statistical criteria.

It is possible to have a preliminary meeting with research participants prior to the actual interview. Typically I conduct such meetings roughly a week before the interview. This preliminary meeting is an opportunity to establish trust with the participant, review ethical considerations and complete consent forms. During this initial meeting with the participant it is also useful to review the research question. This gives the participant time to dwell and ponder on the experience. By going about it in this way it can aid the researcher in getting a richer description during the interview without the researcher having to ask too many questions. The standard objection to this suggestion is that the interviewee will start to self-interpret the event and the description will lose its raw, spontaneous and pre-reflective signature. However, this is usually not the case, although some self-interpretations do tend to increase with certain richness in the data. The goal of the later data analysis is to describe the psychological meaning, and this also includes describing the psychological meaning of the participant’s self-interpretations (Giorgi, 1997).

There is no prescribed way of doing a good phenomenological interview except for following the overall criterion mentioned as well as following some of the suggestions mentioned above. However, what can be done

here is to give a specific example of parts of a longer interview and to comment on the interaction when it is on target or not on target, in terms of the above recommendations as well as the other issues mentioned above. It is through an openness and reflection on one's previous phenomenological interviews that one can become a better interviewer, in a sense very similar to a phenomenological training of one's own empathic abilities (cf., Englander & Robinson, 2009). Examples are taken from an interview from the study of the phenomenon *the lived persistent meaning of an early emotional memory* (Englander, 2007). In order to not take up too much space here, I have only included parts of this interview.

Interviewer: Please describe a situation in which you remembered something emotional. Choose an early emotional memory that emerged in an everyday type of situation. Be sure to describe the situation as well as the early emotional memory. Be as specific and detailed as possible.

Interviewee: Okay, it was in 1991 . . . my (great) grandmother was still alive and she's very old . . . and she's kind of strict . . . and she's just not necessarily a warm person, but she's really nice and I like her. But this one particular day I just didn't want to go because it was really dismal outside and she's old. Sometimes old people are just kind of, not crusty but just like when you're around old people, you know. They kind of smell and they're old and they have funny houses. So we went over to her house and my uncle . . . Anyway we go over to her house, and she lives like in the middle of the town in this old house . . . And we're walking up the stairs and I walked in the door and it was just like there was this smell, you know, maybe a mixture between mold and like old. It smelled old. The carpet was like this carpet. It was like an army green. And my uncle was staying with her and my great grandmother, you know she came to the door . . . all the window curtains were like shut. I still don't understand why and we kind of walked in and like "oh hi." My uncle is a smoker, he's got bloodshot eyes, he looks like he's just been dragged through the mud you know, through life. He had his bed out in the living room and you walk into the living room and it's just kind of a very small open space . . . Very small. And it was where she was staying and she was about to move. And so they were just kind of in there. There was no music, no nothing, it kind of smelled old, and she came in and like there were maybe two or three chairs. It wasn't ready for guests at all and it was my mom and me, my brother, and my older sister. And we just walked in and it just, the minute I walked in it just felt horrible in there. It just smelled old, it seemed so dismal, it just seemed like a cave in there. Like

some kind of a . . . void of any life and not comfortable at all. And my great grandma was just kind of in the kitchen doing her own thing and my uncle and her were kind of bickering in between and we just kind of sat down and we were just like holding our hands on our laps. You know, like try to talk with her through the kitchen and just try to have a nice visit. It just. I didn't like it at all. But then the minute I walked in the door it just reminded me completely. I just was taken back to my dad's girlfriend's apartment, it was almost the same exact place. An old house sitting in the, well part of a house, but it was just dark, the same kind of carpet, the same kind of smell. It was like the moisture had filled the carpet and whatever and started molding. And so when I was sitting there I just imagined how, I mean I wasn't imagining it, it felt like it. It felt exactly like when I was sitting there after my dad had just brought us to her house after he had had that accident with his head. We were brought to her house and she kind of brought him in and laid him on the door, and my brother and I. I think that was like 1984.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about the accident? Exactly what happened?

Before moving any further, let me comment on what is going on in the interview process in relation to the phenomenon. Remember, it is important to be present to what is going on in the subject-subject relation as well as being able to switch to a presence towards the research phenomenon (i.e., the subject-phenomenon relation). The interviewee responds to the initial question and starts to describe the situation in which she remembered the early childhood memory. We can also see how the participant makes the connection in her description to the early emotional event when she says: "*But then the minute I walked in the door it just reminded me completely. I just was taken back to my dad's girlfriend's apartment. . . .*" which is the transition (i.e., remembering) to the early emotional event. In this way, it is essential for the researcher to also keep track of the three dimensions of time present in the interview situation. The participant is in the present describing a memory of an experience during which she remembered something. Note that we are not concerned with the factual accuracy of the participant's memory (as in false memory research), but instead the lived persistent psychological meaning of an early emotional memory. Hence, and at this point (remember there is also a second, follow-up question that is planned for the interview), the focus for the researcher is here to make

sure that the participant in the present, interview situation describes a situation in which she remembers an early emotional event. Let us continue (and I will repeat the interviewer's last question):

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about the accident? Exactly what happened?

Interviewee: Yeah, he had fallen off the bike, we were riding down the side of the road. And it was a sunny day so it started off being a nice trip. He fell, got a rock wedged in his head, and it was bleeding. It was on his temple and it was bleeding on his face. He was fine. It must have hurt, I imagine it hurt and I imagine that it just kind of shocked him, and he was trying to get himself together and be the man and be the father and he's got two kids, small kids. And that's basically it and after that, he just tried to get himself together. That was very far away from where we were supposed to go. It had to be, I don't know, it was not close. We were still on our bikes and he just really wanted to get into town and you know, so he just kind of got himself together and we continued to ride into town. And we had talked about, well I had thought that we were going to his office because his office was like a home away from home. But we ended up going further to his girlfriend's apartment, a girlfriend who we didn't know was the girlfriend at the time but obviously it was in hindsight. And we probably knew, more than likely we knew. We did know, I knew, but they hadn't really declared their love for each other or been together necessarily and here was the option for us to either have gone back home after he had his accident because we were closer to home than we were to actually getting downtown or gone to his office, but he had decided that he wanted to go to his girlfriend's house because she was the person who was going to take care of him. And by that time it was like we had not even been there and so we kind of got there. He was still very, he was a little bit disoriented but still trying to get himself together. You know, we kind of went into her apartment. Walked up the steps, almost the same exact steps as my grandmother's house, my great grandmother's. I'm just going to say grandmother, but you understand she's my great grandmother. And just, I mean it was like just kind of coming into this strange house, and it was so unreal to me. And my dad's girlfriend took him and laid him down on the bed. We sat there the whole time for the most part until she kind of got up and recognized that we needed something to do. And it kind of reminded me of, I mean being in my great grandmother's house, you know, that's exactly what we did. We just sat there not knowing what to do with ourselves. It was kind of like a bunker. It smelled horrible to me and it was not necessarily warm. There was all the same exact colors

going on. No sunshine coming in. In her apartment it was like, you know, the same. When my brother and I were sitting in my dad's girlfriend's apartment, we just kind of sat there and wait and my brother was being very reckless. He was very active and he just wanted something to do. He wasn't necessarily conscious of what was going on. I was and it frightened me so I was very uncomfortable. I really didn't know how to act, I didn't know how to handle myself or what to say, what to. I just sat there. I gotta wait for, maybe my dad will just get up and feel better and we can go. And my brother was oh, I want to get up and I want to look around. And he was trying to get up, and I was just pulling him down and pulling him down. And then after a while she came out and she kind of gave me something to do. And kind of gave my brother maybe like a book to read, I'm not sure what actually. I don't know what she gave him to do. But she kind of told us what to do and we were there for at least a couple hours. It wasn't really a short, it wasn't a long time but it just seemed like a long time. It just was anti-fun . . .

Now, let us make another stop and see what is going on before moving any further. In responding to the question about the initial memorial situation we receive a description of it, as well as spontaneous lapses between the two different memories. At the end of the description (which is not included here), it seems as if the participant has come to a level of saturation talking about the two experiences. The researcher is present to the participant seemingly having reached a limit (in the present interview situation) where the possibilities of further descriptions of the two experiences are not possible (subject-subject relation), and thus he asks the second planned question (in the semi-structured interview) in order to capture the second aspect of the phenomenon under investigation (subject-phenomenon relation); that is, "the lived persistent meaning." Now what follows is also a minor confusion within the interview situation. Let us continue to see what happens.

Interviewer: Let me ask you this question. How has this memory affected your life? What kind of impact has it had on your life?

Interviewee: My dad's girlfriend's apartment or my grandmother? Both?

Of course, this confusion does not come as a surprise since the participant has been describing two different memorial situations and is thus not clear as to what the researcher's intention is in relation to the question asked. This particular confusion is a good example of the fact that the researcher

now has an exaggerated focus on the subject-phenomenon relation and that he has temporarily lost some of his presence to the subject-subject relation. To acquire the skill of being able to shift *presence* (i.e., from the subject-phenomenon to the subject-subject relation and back) is key to becoming a good phenomenological interviewer. Anyhow, the minor confusion is quickly cleared up by a clarification of the question.

Interviewer: The first memory. How has this impacted, what impact has it had on your life?

Interviewee: Like when I am having to either, in like social situations. There have been a couple social situations especially. In fact, I was out on a date like about two months ago and we had gone to a place where I just felt very uncomfortable. And not even the same thing as like what I was describing as my grandmother's and my dad's girlfriend's. I just felt very frightened by not necessarily the person, by the situation. And so at some point in the dinner, I was like, "You know what, I have to go" and I just left. I had to get out of there. To me, it's a very primitive immature feeling, the kind that children have where they just can't take anything any more and it's like no more, and that's exactly how it is. So that was one particular incident. Another time, it's like a lot of times when I am here at the library. I was her on Wednesday night, you know, before mid terms week. And I don't like midterms, nobody does, but you know, at some point you just realize that you can't afford to be on your own time. You just have to do things even if you're tired or hungry. You have to just go and study, and the only place I can do that is here in this library. It's so cold here to me and sterile. I came here and am sitting here reading. I had to get the assignment done. I mean, I was really going to be in a lot of trouble if I didn't get this assignment done and I knew that I couldn't go home. This was, like Wednesday, I think it was Wednesday. If I went home, I was just going to watch TV and I was going to eat and go to bed, I'm that tired. I just had a horrendous week. So I'm sitting here, I sit down for two minutes and my feet start getting cold and I'm just like, fuck it, I'm not staying here anymore because it was just, it was too much for me. I was so uncomfortable. I just was tired and hungry and I couldn't take it. I think that sometimes, this has happened on many occasions... when I have to go outdoors, it's so absolutely intolerable to me if I start to get cold. I think the cold and the hungry really trigger that too. It's the same thing. It's like my whole point in life, I guess maybe I'm a hedonist but is to be comfortable. Why not? And so whenever I'm not, I literally just have to get up and anything's possible and get out. And I, many people have told me I'm very rude for that. There have been many occasions when people

have just. This is like a habit, now it's just like a personality trait. But I just. And I think a lot of it has to do with that. I'm not going to attribute it to this memory solely, But it definitely has a very large impact. That was the first time in my life, I think it was the first time in my life having to deal with my dad and his girlfriend that I had felt that intensity and I realized I never wanted to go back. And of course, you know, having to go to my grandmother's house years later was just like a revisit. My mom is always very warm, and there was always people around. My dad is the same way too actually. I think that sometimes in this day and age I just kind of don't want to, I know what I don't want. And it's hard for me to describe that feeling, it really is someday maybe I will. Maybe I'll just say okay, that's it, I'm going to describe this feeling of being alone and frightened right to the T but I can't, it is hard for me. Not necessarily because I don't know, I just don't know how to describe it exactly.

This interview continues and the participant provides more examples from everyday life of the lived persistent meaning of her early emotional memory. Note that the interview has been shortened in this particular presentation and that certain passages have been cut out due to limited space.

Now there are perhaps some unclear passages in an interview that the researcher at a later stage wants to get better description of and it is thus legitimate to go back to the participant and ask for more descriptions. Since Giorgi's (2009) method is descriptive, it is important to understand that if certain passages are unclear, it is not justifiable, later on in the analysis, to start making theoretical interpretations to make such passages appear more clear (see also Giorgi, 1992). Note that we are dealing with research participants that can be interviewed more than once. If, on the other hand, we are not able to interview them again and we still want to be in the mode of description, we are to describe the unclearness present in the data. In other words, the interpretative strategy of bringing in hypotheses, theories, existential assumptions, and so on is not appropriate for the descriptive method following a Husserlian phenomenological approach towards human scientific research. Husserlian (1998/1913) phenomenology is based upon the phenomenological reduction, which is a descriptive mode (c.f., to Heidegger who never used the reduction and thus utilized an interpretive mode). Hence, we can once again see the interdependent relationship between theory of science, data collection, and data analysis.

The last step in preparing a longer interview that has been recorded for analysis is that it is typed up. Now, it is advised that the researcher completes

this work by him- or herself, since it will aid the researcher to reach a depth of understanding of the experience and also help in the transition to the first step in the data analysis. It is wise here, according to Giorgi (2009) to rewrite the interview from first person to third person before doing the data analysis, since this will provide the researcher with a better focus on the phenomenon as such. In other words, it will help the researcher to focus more on the subject-phenomenon that is a shift of attitude requirement in the data analysis phase.

Conclusion

Interviewing in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research should be seen as a specific mode of data gathering that is integrally related to the research process as a whole. The purpose of this article has been to outline and to elaborate upon some specific theoretical issues in relation to traditional data gathering categories such as the selection of participants, the necessary number of participants needed for a phenomenological study, the interview questions, procedures, and so on. As we can recall from Giorgi (2009), the main task is that the interviewer has to keep the descriptive criterion in mind throughout the process. The task is demanding since it requires the interviewer to make constant intentional shifts (i.e., between the subject-subject relation and the subject-phenomenon relation) while staying within an overall single mode of consciousness. It is suggested that through critical, phenomenological reflection upon one's previous interviews a researcher can become a more *present* interviewer. We also raised some methodological concerns, in particular the one that deals with the notion of what "representativeness" means in phenomenological research. One has to remember that in Husserlian phenomenology, the achievement of generality is possible by being present to the general in the data (eidetically determined), in contrast to how generality is viewed in quantitative research based on sampling methods. Thus, there is also a difference in the strategies involved in selecting the participants for a phenomenological study, as opposed to quantitative approaches.

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