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Phenomenology & Education Research

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This paper grows out of an interest in the possible role and scope of phenomenology as a research methodology within education, and, more broadly, with how phenomenology has been translated out of philosophy into the education context.

I come to these questions with a background in philosophy but an only recent involvement in educational research. My interests are in the area of postgraduate education and, in particular, with the question of how the nature of the research student experience can be understood and adequately theorised. The research techniques that I have used to do this research have been primarily qualitative, such as focus group and interviews. I have also, however, used quantitative research techniques, particularly multiple-choice surveys, as a way of contextualising the qualitative findings.

Throughout this research I have asked myself how the research that I am doing might be understood within a phenomenological framework. I am particularly interested in how the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the research that I am doing might be brought together in some sort of productive dialogue. What I have noticed, however, is that within education research the phenomenological approach has come to be treated as synonymous with the notion of lived experience. This has meant that as an approach it has been associated almost exclusively with qualitative research techniques and methods – semi-structured interviews and various models of reflective practice. This has implications for what gets counted as viable phenomenological data and, therefore, what is treated as a legitimate data source.

Reflecting on these issues lead me to think about the question of how a phenomenology of lived experience frames its relationship to non-lived experience. What becomes of non-lived experience in this model? This paper aims to begin to address this question and argue that in attending to the relationship between lived and non-lived experience there is an opportunity to re-think the possible scope and role of phenomenological research within education.

Lived experience

The notion of lived experience came to prominence within education through the work of Max van Manen, particularly his 1990 volume: *Researching Lived Experience*. This volume has been influential as one of the first works devoted to setting out a model for phenomenological research within education. The notion of lived experience is, as the title of the book suggests, at the core of this approach, and relates to that domain of experience that occurs in our direct acquaintance with things, as opposed to what occurs secondarily through abstract reflection. This means that, as a research method, phenomenology is concerned with the qualities, values, and impressions of our experiences rather than with the what, when and why characteristic of empirical methods. The key difference between van Manen's human science approach and that of the empirical analytical sciences is that the later is concerned with experience as it is lived - or in its immediacy, rather than in the detachment characteristic of conceptual, abstract thought. Phenomenology for van Manen, aims to describe and interpret lived, or existential, meanings. These are meanings that occur in the immediacy of everyday life. In the words of van Manen:

Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld - the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize or reflect on it. (1990, 9)

van Manen derived the notion of lived experience from Husserl's notion of the *lebenswelt*, or lifeworld. This is the everyday, intuitive, world of our day to day experience, in contrast to the idealized, cognitive world of the sciences and mathematics. In Husserl, the lifeworld refers to both the experiential world of perception, or intuition - that which grounds our activities and interests, as well as the world as a whole - or that which encompasses the multiplicity of particular worlds.

van Manen's and Husserl's interest in the lifeworld, however, differs. In turning to the lifeworld, Husserl's intention was to draw attention to the hitherto unthematized ground of all scientific inquiry, thereby providing a foundation for science that it itself was unable to provide. Husserl was interested in the transcendental question as to the conditions of the possibility of a lifeworld. (1970) As a phenomenology of the human sciences, however, van Manen, sees the lifeworld as the world of lived experience and is interested in the essence, or nature, of lived experiences as they are brought to light through the experience of individuals.

So what does investigating experience as it is lived involve? It means, in the words of van Manen;

...becoming full of the world, full of lived experience. ...phenomenological research requires of the researcher that he or she stands in the fullness of life, in the midst of the world of living relations and shared situations. (1990, 32)

As the above passage aptly demonstrates, explicating the meaning of the notion of lived experience is difficult. While the term itself seems to contain a tautology - surely all experience is lived (?) - what is also apparent is that lived experience tends to get defined in terms of what it is not. Lived meanings, we are told, are not conceptualised meanings, or as van Manen suggests in other passages, they are not abstracted from the everyday, and therefore, un-worldly or speculative.

What often happens in phenomenological research is that what counts as lived experience tends to get defined against, or in opposition to, what is not perceived to constitute lived experience. I provide two examples of this below.

In her work on the transformations of practice arising within bilingual education Carmen Mercado describes her work as a 'self-study' through critical reflection and dialogue on lived experience. (1996) This study takes place within the setting of a literacy course and locates the lived experience of the researcher in dialogue with that of the pupils. Mindful of issues surrounding cultural and social diversity, Mercado's aim in using a phenomenological approach is to facilitate, what she calls, 'a dialogue across differences'. This is achieved by both the students and researcher exchanging roles and critically reflecting upon their respective experience.

What does lived experience mean in this context? There are two main features of the study to which the notion of lived experience seems to refer. Firstly, to the way in which participants were encouraged to reflect on their own personal, or immediate, experience, and secondly, to the enduring nature of that period of reflection - the fact that the study was on-going over a period of time. In Mercado's analysis of the outcomes of the program she states that: "a critical stance toward pedagogy became a lived experience during an entire

semester." In other words, the research was 'lived' in that it was inhabited as a part of professional life: both personally and temporally.

While Mercado does not provide a clear definition of what is meant by the notion of lived experience, it is apparent that, following van Manen, it is linked to the immediacy of personal experience. This theme is also evident in my next example. Here, however, the epistemological value attached to such experience is more directly spelt out.

J. F. Donnelly draws on van Manen's work to argue for a re-thinking of the place of theory and reflection in educational practice. He does this by foregrounding non-cognitive modes of being.(1999) Donnelly is critical of the way that the teachers role has been theorised as a primarily instrumentalist activity, or one grounded in propositional or representational knowledge. This, according to Donnelly, overlooks the characteristics of teaching that are not reducible to theoretical ways of knowing. Phenomenological, or existential, characteristics of the practice of teaching enact, in his words:

..."the centrality of lived experience, collectively sustained traditions of practice and, perhaps, intuition".(1999, 942)

Here, like Mercado, Donnelly foregrounds the status of personal, non-theoretical, experiences in phenomenological research in education. What these examples demonstrate is how lived experience can be understood as an alternative site of what constitutes knowledge. Donnelly rejects theoretical conceptions of knowledge in favour of the kind of know-how that develops through experience. This is knowledge, one might say, that occurs 'on the job' - or, more broadly, through doing. Similarly, Mercado emphasises the kind of knowledge that develops through personal experience.

While I do not believe that personal experience, intuition and know-how lack legitimacy as sites of knowledge, in both of these examples an opposition tends to be set-up between lived and non-lived experience. Lived-experience, therefore, gets treated, not as an alternative site of knowledge production, but rather, as a privileged site of knowledge production. What are the implications of this for how phenomenology as a research practice might be understood?

Firstly, there is a danger that in the distinction between practice and theory the former will be valued over and above the latter. That the value that is attributed to what is learnt through personal experience, in other words, is done so at the cost of what might be learnt through theory or abstract reflection. While this raises questions about what distinguishes practice from theory, and vice versa, it also raises a broader question. Is the notion of lived experience, and by extension, phenomenology, intended to signal an alternative model of what might be thought of to count as knowledge, or alternatively, of what *ought* to count as knowledge?

The tension within phenomenological thought between theoretical and non-theoretical knowledge is demonstrated in one of van Manen's more recent papers where he distinguishes between theoretical or philosophical phenomenology and what he calls engaged phenomenology, or that conducted by professionals in education, health etc (1997, 6). This latter group, according to van Manen, are more able to enrich and shed light on our understanding of the significance of everyday experiences than the former because they engage with their own lived experience as educators, health professionals etc. The implication is that philosophers merely theorise and therefore are less engaged with the realm of the everyday.

The second issue that arises from the privileging of lived experience over and against non-lived experience is the danger that the subject will be understood as the site of some sort of pure, unmediated, knowledge or understanding. According to a post-structuralist critique, foregrounding the immediacy of experience in opposition to that which is abstract, or secondary, results in a model of the subject as pure and present to themselves and, therefore, untainted by theory and everything that it implies; language, culture, history, etc. Peter Willis, for example, describes phenomenological practice as seeking what he calls 'presences', by getting back to a first level of awareness, prior to engaging in conceptual processes, and generating, in his words:

...so called "immediate" knowledge of some thing or event, [by] seeking to "bracket out" received views and namings...(1999, 93)

Perhaps this valuing of practice over theory, and the immediate over the secondary, is an inevitable consequence of a model of inquiry that aims to challenge the ascendancy of rationalism. Clearly much of the appeal of phenomenology lies in the fact that it offers an alternative to the positivistic models of inquiry that have emerged through modern science. And, indeed, phenomenologists should challenge those epistemological models. What needs more attention, however, is the question of the relation between what does and does not count as lived experience.

This issue takes us back to Husserl and the phenomenological legacy on which van Manen draws. The polarization that exists in van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology between lived experience on the one hand and the theoretical and conceptual on the other might be understood as symptomatic of a deeper problem within Husserl's notion of the lifeworld itself. Heidegger was critical of Husserl's notion of the lifeworld because he thought that it lent itself to readily to a subjectivistic model of understanding. That is, he felt that the emphasis on our intuitive relation to things perpetuated the Cartesian tendency of treating the world as a world *for* consciousness. In contrast, for Heidegger we are always already *in* the world and this occurs through a complex nexus of involvement that cannot be explained merely through reference to one region of existence alone - such as intuition. Heidegger asserts that our primary interaction with things is purposeful, but this does not necessarily imply an opposition between theory and practice. This point has been made by Jeff Malpas, where he claims that, for Heidegger:

...our ordinary involvement in the world would seem typically to call upon both engaged and disengaged modes of access to things - everyday practice involves the encounter with things as both *Zuhandenes* and *Vorhandenes*.(1998, 94)

The distinction between *Zuhandenes*, or ready-to-hand, and *Vorhandenes*, present-to-hand, is Heidegger's and it points to the different ways that things can be grasped or encountered. While the later relates most closely with the notion of direct intuitive engagement with things the later is more characteristic of the disengagement, or detachment, of modern science. The crucial point made by Malpas, however, is that for Heidegger the structural feature of our involvement with the world that this distinction points to is one of unity: the two, while different, are interconnected and inseparable.

It is not that science and the everyday do not present different ways of relating to things, the question is, what is the relation between the two. Indeed, this question was there at the beginning of phenomenology with Husserl. His purpose was not to reject science, but on the contrary, to radically re-invigorate it. Husserl's aim was to recover the forgotten ground of the lifeworld and, therefore, to ground science in that from which it emerges. For Husserl, then, it was not that the objectivising, theorising and measuring practices of science should be

abandoned, but rather, be re-situated in, and informed by, the world of perception and interest, valuation and action that constitutes our everyday experience of the world.

While my suggestion is not that education research should take up Husserl's project, I do believe that there is a lesson contained within it. This is that phenomenology has a role to play in informing as well as transforming other models of inquiry, such as those abstracting and objectivising practices promoted by positivism. This gets lost sight of, I believe, in the way that the notion of lived experience gets set up in opposition to theoretical models of knowledge, rather than as a way of problematizing that very opposition. There is an opportunity, I believe, for phenomenological research to engage more with the tensions between theory and practice, and abstraction and immediacy, in a way that perhaps other theoretical frameworks are less equipped to do.

What are the implications of this for educational research? While providing an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, there are examples of educational researchers using phenomenology to challenge the opposition between theory and practice and abstraction and immediacy. Thomas Nielsen makes this case in relation to art education (2000). He uses a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to claim that a combination of factual information and subjective experience results in a deeper quality of understanding than would be the case if artistic work were approached in either mode in isolation. Others have also made a similar point in relation to the opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods. Gary Fenstermacher and Matthew Sanger, for example, propose that:

The significance of the problem of knowledge is not in the debate between sensationalism and rationalism but in what is made possible by bringing them into harmonious relationship.(1998)

While I am not sure whether a harmonious relationship is what should be sought here, looking at the relationship between the poles of sensationalism and rationalism, particularly the tensions, requires further inquiry.

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