

## Disclosing the Making of Phenomenological Research: Setting Free the Meanings of Discourse

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**Abstract:** In this article we aim to share reflections we have concerning qualitative research methodology from a phenomenological perspective within the context of the Graduate Program on Education at Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil. The concepts that have informed our studies, as well as the subjects of our research, have led us to a methodology that builds upon a phenomenological/philosophical base. From this perspective, understanding reality entails comprehending the significance of cultural phenomena, and thus relies upon life experiences stemming from lived practices. At this stage, we have elected *discourse* (understood from the perspectives of Paulo FREIRE and Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY) as the main focus of our reflections. Phenomenologically based research reveals structural conditions of multiple meanings, with their values and norms that transmit the representations of groups which are situated in socio-historical, economic and cultural contexts. Through discourse we are able to capture the relationships, the revealing intentions, significances and subjectivities, which, from our standpoint, are fundamental elements of the process of comprehending the world.

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## 1. The Phenomenological Approach and the Researcher's Attitude

Phenomenological qualitative research, more than just an instrumental methodological choice, calls for an inquisitive researcher who is invested in the fundamentals of phenomenology. "Phenomenology is, first and foremost, a method [...] but only as long as it is an inseparable method from the corresponding philosophical attitude" (REZENDE, 1990, p.13). [1]

Doing phenomenological research entails unraveling the internal structures of meanings, not to proving or demonstrating. There are no hypotheses that guide the work and which demand support. There are no truths to be confirmed. Phenomenological research begins with lived experience, the concreteness of life, and the unique. It is the essence which is explored. The phenomenological

quest for truth is based upon the diversity of truth's manifestations, as REZENDE (1990, p.29) has stated:

"Phenomenology is not a philosophy of evidence but of truth in all of its manifestations. As a matter of fact, truth not only manifests but also hides itself, and its hiding is still one of its forms of manifestations. The unveiling [...] consists of discovering [...] that truth never reveals itself entirely." [2]

Phenomenological questions are questions that wrestle with the meaning and significance of certain phenomena, "that something which can become manifest, visible" (ESPÓSITO, 1997, p.79; see also, HEIDEGGER, 1977). Thus, achieving statistical, generalizable, true, correct and quantifiable results, as in positivistic research, is not the objective of phenomenological research, for its proposition is not to find the solution to problems, but to *problematize* a(n) (unveiled) phenomenon to be comprehended. *Problematizing* is the process of posing questions in order to deconstruct a particular phenomenon so as to understand its construct. It's associated with critical thinking/inquiry; that is, being able to understand, analyze, and affect the socio-historical, economic, cultural, and political realities that constitute people's lives (JUREMA, 1998). As Paulo FREIRE has written, one can know only to the extent that one *problematizes* the natural, cultural and historical reality in which she or he is immersed. [3]

*Problematizing* is the antithesis of the technocrat's "problem-solving" stance. Thus, phenomenology does not solve problems. Problem-solving means seeking solutions, correct knowledge, effective procedures, winning strategies, calculative techniques, methods which get results. In the latter approach, an expert takes some distance from reality, reduces it to its component parts, devises means for resolving difficulties in the most efficient way, and then dictates a strategy or policy. Such problem-solving, according to FREIRE (1994), distorts the totality of human experience by reducing it to those dimensions which are amenable to treatment as mere difficulties to be solved. [4]

Meaning questions cannot be solved and thus done away with (MARCEL, 1949, 1950). In some sense, meaning questions can never be answered; they will always remain the subject matter of lived lives, and they will need to be *appropriated* (i.e. internalized), as in LEONTIEV (1978) and VYGOTSKY (1997), in a personal way by anyone who hopes to benefit from such insight. [5]

The unveiling of the phenomenon's essence requires from the phenomenological researcher the description, comprehension and interpretation of this phenomenon in the quest of its meaning and intent. The researcher understands that

"[p]henomenology places us before a complex reality: the structure of the phenomenon itself, whose experience is not reduced to any of its forms of intent but, rather, integrates them. The main concern of phenomenology is to state in what way there is meaning, and even in what ways there are meanings. Better still, it makes us realize that there will always be more meaning beyond all that we can say" (REZENDE, 1990, p.17). [6]

In contrast from what happens in positivistic research, the phenomenological researcher gives relevance to the subject within a social and historical context. Phenomenology emphasizes the individual's perceptions and, above all, highlights the meaning she or he attributes to the phenomenon. Positivistic research in education fragments reality as if it were formed by watertight compartments with no relation between them. This atomized perspective of reality takes social phenomena as isolated *facts*, faces the world as fixed detached parts. Therefore, it does not consider the historical-dialectical movement which permits transforming these phenomena; it does not consider the possible connections among the phenomena, and not having an organic view of social reality, limiting their findings. [7]

Moreover, positivistic research confines itself to the quantification of observable facts (DURKHEIM, 1975). By restricting reality to only observable facts, positivistic research disregards the complex phenomena of social and psychological order. [8]

Phenomenology, in contrast, stands to intentionally describe lived experience. It considers a world marked by education, culture, relationships, and by all that characterizes our presence in the world, summarizing by all those aspects which mark our experiences as a human experience. Phenomenological research, unlike positivistic research, makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our experience. In other words, phenomenological research, as MERLEAU-PONTY (1973) wrote, "consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life" (p.142). Experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it. MERLEAU-PONTY (1962) showed that turning to the phenomena of lived experience means relearning how to look at the world by reawakening the basic experience of the world. [9]

Moreover, phenomenology deals with a reality whose possibilities are unending, because it is *perspectival*, i.e., each researcher faces the phenomena from her or his own way of seeing and interrogating them. That is the way the interview, as a basic methodological procedure in qualitative research, is given relevance in phenomenological research, as "it gives the researcher the chance to be transported into the subject's world" (BOGDAN & BIKLEN, 1994, p.138). [10]

## **2. The Interview as a Means of Valuing the Other's Discourse: What Discourse?**

In phenomenological research data collection emphasizes the speech of the interviewee; in qualitative research talk is prioritized. The emphasis on language allows for the comprehension of the significance that an individual attributes to her or his experience of the world. Therefore, "to listen carefully" is vital in an interview, as it is by careful listening that the interviewer is able to unveil the sense and the meanings of speech. The words of the interviewee have the potential of "unveiling the mystery which constitutes the way each subject sees

the world" (BOGDAN & BIKLEN, 1994, p.137). The interviewer will construct a question guide—not a fixed one—to elicit speech from the interviewee so that she or he may, upon describing the observed phenomenon, reveal meaning. More to the point, the sole objective is to favor spontaneous and free speech in order that the interviewee's own voice is amplified. [11]

Consequently, in the context of an interview within phenomenological research, we will consider speech as being, in itself, a discourse. The question is not about discourse in the sense of language understood as a set of structures utilized by people in their transactional communication with the world. In order to speak, people need to use language, but discourse is not confined to a word, or a sentence. Rather, it conveys ideas and meanings as it is a human phenomenon (JUREMA, 1998). Therefore, talking transcends language.

"The word, set aside from language, is this moment in which the intended meaning, still voiceless and all in act, reveals itself capable of becoming part of culture, mine and that of the other, capable of forming me and him, transforming the meaning of the cultural instruments" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1980, p.134). [12]

The comprehension of the meanings referred to by the author goes beyond lexis. There are words whose meanings cannot be reached by looking them up in a dictionary: "the knowledge of grammar is not enough to the interpretation itself. More than the knowledge of grammar, the interpretation [...] supposes the sense of meaning" (REZENDE, 1990, p.31). [13]

The discourse, among other forms of expressions—literature, theater, painting, etc.—is the only one that is able to establish itself and to become an intersubjective form of knowledge (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996). For REZENDE (1990), as speakers express themselves they acquire awareness, because they are not just speaking to others, but also to themselves. Thus, it is through capturing the other's thoughts through talk that we become able to think accordingly. Talk and thought are bound together in a way that, "the meaning is rooted in talking, and talking is the externalization of meaning" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996, p.247). [14]

Consequently, one cannot see talking as a wrapping layer of our thoughts, for talking is a linguistic gesture, it is thought in action. As such, talking is authentic discourse. And being authentic talking generates a new meaning and gives oneself the power to transcend "toward a new behavioral pattern, toward the other, or still toward his own thoughts, through his body and speech" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996, p.267). [15]

In our researches we connect the above assertions to FREIRE's thoughts (1994). For him, action without critical reflection and even without gratuitous contemplation is purely activism. We agree with FREIRE when he states that theory or introspection in the absence of collective social action is escapist idealism or wishful thinking. In his view, genuine action can only be derived from *praxis* generated in historical struggles. *Problematize* in his sense is to associate

an entire populace to the task of codifying total reality into symbols which can generate critical consciousness and empower them to alter their relations with nature and social forces. In this sense, *problematizing* is setting free the meaning of the discourse. It is the discourse setting you free. Authentic discourse not only unveils the phenomenon, it reveals the human being and the work that sets her or him free. [16]

## 2.1 The word that sets you free

The liberation of the oppressed mediated by their talk, their word, in relation to the world is very evident in FREIRE's reflections (1978, 2001). His liberating pedagogy consists of making everyone capable of learning by uttering their own words in order to humanize themselves. FREIRE insists that "existence itself, because it is human, cannot be mute, silent; much less should it be fed on false words, but on true words. To exist humanely is to pronounce the world, to modify it" (FREIRE, 1978, p.92). [17]

Humanization calls for relations with and among others, people communicating with one another, listening to one another, constructing themselves in an inter-subjective assemblage. Therefore, one understands FREIRE's belief in the importance of dialog. Pronouncing the world is to name it from the perspective of transforming it; it is a political act. FREIRE (2000) exposes the political dimensions of the word when he says that when we give the word to the other we invite her or him to assume her or his own history. By overcoming the culture of silence, women and men discover themselves as subjects of their own history. [18]

FREIRE (1978) also points out that the discourse has two inseparable dimensions: action and reflection. He states that "There is not one word that is not praxis," p.91), recognizing the true word is the one, which contains in itself the keystone of transformation. For FREIRE as for MERLEAU-PONTY (1973), authentic talk is the promise of changes; it is the promise of what is new, appearing in the seed, in the embryo, as an existing possibility. [19]

Despite having a strong political component these concepts are in agreement with what philosopher BUBER wrote regarding genuine dialog:

"[genuine dialog] only happens in utter reciprocity, when the individual experiences the relation beside the other without giving up his own specificity [...] In a dialogical situation, the man who faces me may never be my object. I may have some connection with him [...] Maybe I have something to grasp in him; or perhaps I have something to learn and thus it is just a matter of accepting" (BUBER, 1982, p.8). [20]

To BUBER's thought, true dialog does not consist of a simple conversation, but of the encounter that takes place when "the words transmitted to us may be interpreted as our human turn-to-each-other [...] It is necessary to perceive and accept the other in his full existence, in his unity and unicity" (BUBER, 1982, p.13) so that true dialog can take place. True dialog then, would fundamentally be in the sphere of the *inter-human*, in that dialogical face-to-face, of the one to the

other, which meaning "is not to be found in neither one of the partners, nor would it be found in both together, but it can only be found in an incorporated game between the two of them, in their between" (BUBER, 1982, p.139). [21]

FREIRE, MERLEAU-PONTY as well as BUBER take dialog beyond cognitive, social, political, cultural, psychic, interactive and affective dimensions, which could characterize behaviors of conversation or debate between speakers and listeners. In the Graduate Program in Education of the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), a group of researchers understands the dialog as an eminently privileged human condition, which involves the deepest and most subtle aspects of being. We indicate that individuals' discourse as research data is a vital element in the process of comprehending a phenomenon that we wish to become acquainted with. Let us take a closer look at what we have been doing. [22]

### **3. Phenomenological Research in Education at UFPE's Graduate Program**

In Brazil phenomenological approaches to research in graduate school programs are typically carried out in the fields of psychology and health. This research is usually based on the works of Mauro AMATUZZI (1989) and Dominique AUGRAS (1981), having Amadeo GIORGI's contributions as their basis. Amadeo GIORGI (1985) also inspires such research in the educational field; e.g. the work of Joel MARTINS (1989) and Aparecida VIGGIANI (1997), among others. Educational research that uses the phenomenological approach focuses mainly on didactics, curriculum, and pedagogical practice. In the Research Group on Formation and Pedagogical Practice at the UFPE's Graduate Program in Education, we have prioritized our research based on Antonio REZENDE's thoughts, whose work highlights contributions from RICOEUR, MERLEAU-PONTY and HEIDEGGER. Next we present the summary of three phenomenological studies carried out in the Program. [23]

#### **3.1 Three phenomenological studies in education at UFPE**

NEPOMUCENO (2004) focuses her studies on discourse and aims to make known the volunteer endeavor in public schools and its relation to the school community. The main object of her study is to understand how volunteer action takes place in public education, and how this phenomenon's repercussions involve educational practice. [24]

She uses the analogy of *paths of life* as a metaphor in her research; metaphor is commonly used in qualitative approaches that have a phenomenological basis. However the final theoretical-methodological proposition is one of *dialogic phenomenology*: "Dialogical phenomenology admits and searches the enriching collaboration from other currents of thought which brings contributions to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon" (JUREMA & AUSTREGÉSILO, 2004, p.1012). [25]

The results of NEPOMUCENO's (2004) research yield a complex phenomenon as they reveal the existence of a conflicting and contradicting relationship between schools and society. As a much talked about topic in Brazil, volunteering draws attention to the necessity of further in-depth analysis if one is to achieve effective changes that are consistent with school routines. In this light, to state that volunteering may or may not modify something in the public school sector, requires one to analyze not only volunteering itself, but also the school in relation to society. It still entails understanding of the fact that those changes will take place in various ways: educational practice, pedagogical plan, and management and educational policies. [26]

PIMENTEL's (2005) research has as its main objective the understanding of repetition (*repetência*) in a public school, from the student's viewpoint. Repetition is a school phenomenon characterized by the student's repeating the same grade. It means that the student has failed one or more courses, therefore she or he has to *repeat* the whole school year again—including disciplines in which she or he might have performed acceptably. This phenomenon means failure, it usually implies a negative impact for students' lives, with strong repercussions for the development of their self-esteem and self-concept. Thus, it is common for these students experience increasingly poor school performance which may lead to further repetition, stigma and stigmatized behaviors, branding them as *repetentes* (repetition students). To the school system this repetition phenomenon creates a distortion between the student's age and the school year they attend. Some schools even create specific classes for the *repetentes*, a step before their total exclusion from the school system. Typically the *repetentes* students have been held accountable for their repetition(s), a narrow perspective that ignores that within the learning context there is a two-way relation between the one who learns and the one who teaches. Therefore, there are co-responsibilities from which the school cannot be exempt. [27]

PIMENTEL (2005) looks at the phenomenon of repetition in the context of pedagogical practice. Based upon students' descriptions of their experiences with repetition, she looks at their speech from the perspectives of MERLEAU-PONTY (1962, 1973) CHAUÍ (1980) and FREIRE (1978, 2000, 2001), as a means by which repetition and its meanings can be revealed. [28]

PIMENTEL (2005) presents repetition as a manifold problem that requires a discussion of a conceptual nature. She discusses the implications for pedagogical practice in constructing students' self-esteem and self-concept, and the reflexes of both in their learning process and constitution as historical beings. The results of this study reveal that what is meant for the student as punishment but also as a new learning opportunity. It is also true that there are not, within the school, ways for both students and teachers to speak truthfully about the issues of *repetência*. Students' talk as well as their silences do not disclose the meanings of repetition, but reveals students themselves as subjects of authentic talk (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962) and true talk (FREIRE, 1978). In disclosing their meanings about *repetência*, students gain visibility as a subject who knows about herself or himself. A phenomenological approach to the study of repetition takes

results beyond the focus on the causes of repetition only, and leads the researcher into an in-depth analysis of the non-dissociation of teaching and learning. [29]

CORDEIRO (2006) focuses her research on the higher education classroom. She defines the classroom as the *locus* to formation, a place for teachers' professionalization. She wants, searching through pedagogical practices, to identify the epistemological bases supporting this *classroom*, trying to comprehend how the classroom is constituted and constitutes itself. The attempt to understand these features led her to the philosophical bases of "dialogical phenomenology" (REZENDE, 1990; JUREMA & NEPOMUCENO, 2004), as the method to comprehend meanings of this cultural phenomenon—to disclose the higher education classroom through the lived experiences of teachers and students, lived experiences, which are revealed through the discourse of teachers and students in dialog. CORDEIRO says that the classroom can be seen as a *nest* built with many threads marked by a specific time and place. The classroom continues to be built within multiple relations, in a tense process of many dimensions: individual and collective, generalization and specialization, integration and dispersion, competency and competitiveness, theory and practice. [30]

#### 4. Final Considerations

Finally, we understand that a methodological approach represents the *spirit* that moves the research. The research problem is a cultural object, thus humanly constructed, with a complex and symbolic structure, containing an immense network of meanings. Research is searching to develop investigative attitudes of open dialog with these cultural objects in a variety of ways; ways to grasp them and their many meanings. In order to understand them it is necessary to question them, since, not unlike all social events, there are many *secrets* behind the first impressions. [31]

We follow the epistemological approaches that the participants of our research suggest: comprehending reality from a phenomenological orientation, constructing their own way of approaching them, reiterating the purpose of becoming familiar with the phenomenon well beyond its appearances, valuing, above all, individuals' discourse, seeking to interpret and understand them in their many meanings. [32]

In the context of phenomenological research, we believe that an interpretative and systematized description, where one values lived experience and knowledge [re]searching to attribute meanings to reality, will certainly contribute significant insights. Through these means we believe we can *re-mean* reality as we look at it through new lenses. And, by setting free the meanings of discourse, we believe, is a way to improve quality in education. [33]



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