



# The uses of phenomenology and phenomenography: A critical review



Sylvain K. Cibangu\*, Mark Hepworth

Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, phenomenology and phenomenography have gained traction in a wide range of scholarly journals just as confusion has increased about them. Meanwhile, inquiry examining both approaches has been given far less attention. Each of these approaches considers variation, namely, the qualitatively different ways of experiencing, as a central point of research. This paper examines the characteristics of phenomenology and sketches its rapport with phenomenography. The information science literature in six major scholarly journals of information research is examined to appraise the accounts of phenomenology and phenomenography. For the sake of clarity, uses of phenomenology and phenomenography are discussed in light of the concept positivism. It is observed that phenomenography is a subset of phenomenology. In addition, phenomenographic discourse is shown to relay positivism. Under-utilized areas of phenomenology are identified, and paths of future work for information research are proposed.

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## 1. Introduction

Phenomenology is understood in this paper as an approach with which to undertake research and its processes. Methodology, or epistemology, as some would call it (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012), is taken to mean a set of foundational positions, worldviews, or frameworks under which research is conducted. Any scientific research presupposes a worldview(s) under which choices and actions are taken in ways that suit the selected research question and topic. While phenomenology extends back to Aristotle and ancient wisdom (Lusthaus, 2002; Moran, 2000), it was founded by German mathematician and social thinker Husserl (1839–1938) through a series of writings stretching over the late 1800s and the first half of the 20th century. Therefore, in order to make a sound and informed methodological use of the phenomenological agenda, researchers are called to draw from the Husserlian phenomenology. This is also true of phenomenography insofar as “phenomenology is interesting as a general framework for phenomenography” (Uljens, 1992, p. 11; see also Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 117; Svensson, 1997, p. 164). Simply stated, phenomenology seeks to uncover a given phenomenon through people’s lived experiences. The goal is for researchers to return to things themselves (Husserl, 1901/2005). Phenomenography (the Martonian school, detailed below) is an approach that investigates the variation of conceptions related to a given phenomenon (Marton, 2015; Marton & Pong, 2005). To be clear, phenomenology cannot be put on the same footage

with phenomenography. The former boasts an enormous body of literature—spanning more than a century of influential thinkers, artists, architects, and so on (Dittmann, 2013; Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Moran, 2000; Norberg-Schulz, 1980)—a large portion of which is yet to be published or translated, whereas the latter has a theoretical arsenal that more or less started to take shape in the 1990s.

One of the most forgotten legacies of phenomenology is its fight against the flaws besetting modern day societies, such as racism, anti-Semitism, masculinism, Nazism, and so on. Among the figures of this fight, Edit Stein (Stein, 1917/1989, 1945/1996, 1986) stood to be one of the staunchest. The reason for the oversight of such a central aspect of phenomenology lies in people’s tendency to limit phenomenology to the domain of philosophy and sophisticated reasoning. By the same token, phenomenology has pervaded academic research and thinking to such an extent that people hardly realize it. The point is that, as Relph (2014) indicates,

By the time of Husserl’s death in 1938, phenomenology had achieved acceptance not only in philosophy, but also anthropology, sociology and psychology, and it had influenced the work of poets, artists and novelists. This acceptance has since grown to the point where phenomenology is a widely adopted approach in most of the social sciences (p. 99).

From early on, Husserl himself was keen to make phenomenology a practice to be used by humans in all spheres of everyday existence. Consequent to this, awareness of making use of phenomenology past its philosophical boundaries has been long established since Husserl. Nenon (2010) explains that “within the phenomenological tradition it

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: fscib@uw.edu, S.Cibangu@lboro.ac.uk (S.K. Cibangu).

has been clear from that outset that ... phenomenology ... must become a *tradition*, project that is taken up and remains alive by being enacted over and again by persons across generations" (p. 457). By the time Husserl founded phenomenology, research was plagued by positivistic tradition, which taught that authentic knowledge is knowledge that is detached from human context and experience.

## 2. Problem statement

While phenomenology embraces a whole host of trends, it is too often reduced to one line of thought, one definition of term(s), and one style of research seen as theoretical as opposed to empirical. One explanation why phenomenology attracts such an assortment of thinkers and ideas is that since its inception it had self-reflexivity at the heart of its practice. Phenomenography, for its part, presents a much different and low-key scenario, since the idea that led to its inception was to implement curriculums. Therefore, from the early 1990s onward, phenomenography has come under fire from within and outside its circles (Bussey, Orgill, & Crippen, 2013; Cousin, 2009, 2010a,b; Garcez, 2005; Giorgi, 1999; Hallett, 2014; Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Jervis & Jervis, 2005; Richardson, 1999; Säljö, 1994, 1997; Uljens, 1992; Webb, 1996, 1997), and efforts toward addressing the criticized aspects of its methodology have been rather sparse. This is further complicated by the paucity of inquiries scrutinizing phenomenology and phenomenography (Uljens, 1992). The present paper seeks to provoke anew the debate about phenomenology and phenomenography to dispel extant misunderstandings. The main impetus is to raise awareness about the issues involved, to allow for informed and contributive approaches of phenomenography and phenomenology.

## 3. Literature review

One of the benefits of a literature review is the space it affords to identify a field's nature. There are several criteria by which a research tradition can be determined, for example: authors, central concepts, theories or trails, histories or momentums, academic disciplines, regions, and so on. In this paper, phenomenology and phenomenography are identified by specific central concepts and trails derived from respective bodies of work. For ease of communication, the reader is presented with the background underlying both approaches.

### 3.1. Background

One of the best ways of thinking about phenomenology and phenomenography is with the idea of Cartesianism, to which Husserl (1913/2002a, 1929/1991) devoted extensive reflections. Cartesianism, a variant appellation of positivism or rationalism, was a view professed by French philosopher Descartes (1596–1650), which assumed that knowledge should be acquired through the process of doubt, by making the (thinking) self the absolute center of reality at the exclusion of human feelings, emotions, and opinions. The key principle of Cartesianism was *cogito ergo sum*, meaning, "I think therefore I am," which comes from the original French sentence: "*Je pense, donc je suis*" (Descartes, 1637/1987). The Latin verb *cogito* means to ponder well, think, weigh, reflect upon, etc. Other names for Cartesianism were psychologism and solipsism. Psychologism, also called logical psychologism (see Giorgi, 1981; Kusch, 2011), taught that logical laws derive from psychological facts and entities, the consequence being that reality depends on the mental states (of the self). Solipsism held that the self is all that exists, irrespective of the reality around it. Solipsism is a term composed of the two Latin words *solus* and *ipse*. *Solus* (*sola, solum*) means sole, lonely, solitary, alone, single; and *ipse* (*ipsa, ipsum*) signifies himself, herself, it-self, in and by itself (Lewis & Short, 1879). Cartesianism, psychologism, and solipsism were premised on the belief of duality in that there exist two worlds: the internal world (the self, soul) and the external (reality, body). It was believed that the external world was impure, unsure, and

chaotic, and that therefore true knowledge had to be independent from it. This meant that authentic knowledge or logical truth proceeds from and resides in the self or soul. The internal world was believed to be the siege of knowledge. The external world was thus seen as the manifestation or extension of the internal/ideal world.

In essence, Cartesianism insisted on the thinking of the self and its principles, psychologism valued the psychological or mental states of the self, and solipsism privileged one aspect of reality (i.e., self) over the external world. As shown above, this is also the line of thought that came to be called positivism since it provided positive and predictable knowledge. Positive knowledge, at the exclusion of human feelings, opinions, and emotions, etc., is central to Cartesianism. Indeed, the sentence discussed above, which Descartes (1644) later published in Latin for greater readership, reads as, "*dubito ergo cogito, cogito ergo sum*," which means: I doubt (of the external world, the body, etc.), therefore I think, (and) I think therefore I am (Lewis & Short, 1879). Cartesianism, psychologism, and solipsism conjured up the background within which research methodology of the natural and physical sciences was taught and undertaken, and from which Husserl (1913/2002a, 1901/2005) developed the phenomenological tenets. Sure enough, Cartesianism can be seen in discussions held on information phenomena, with the world being divided into two realities: information topic/system on the one hand and the external (real) world on the other. A Cartesian/positivist information researcher is a researcher who focuses *exclusively* on the selected information system or topic, irrespective of the real word (i.e., context, history, community, culture, etc.) in which the system is embedded (see Case, 2012). It bears noting that phenomenographic discourse too seeks to remedy Cartesianism. As Marton (1994a) describes "not being about the person, the individual as such, nor about mental life, nor about behaviour, phenomenography is fundamentally non-psychological" (p. 7).

### 3.2. Central concepts of phenomenology

While phenomenology has come to us as an amalgam of figures and ideas (see De Boer, 1966/1978; Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Moran, 2000; Moran & Mooney, 2002; Sokolowski, 2000), it also exhibits some commonalities seeping through its diverse exponents and positions back to Husserl and to his tenets. For this paper, three most important concepts have been considered to characterize the phenomenological research approach: (1) intentionality, (2) intersubjectivity, and (3) reduction or bracketing.

First, intentionality represents one of the biggest contributions of phenomenology to research methodology (Husserl, 1913/2002a, 1919/2002b). Although Husserl was not the first to use the term intentionality, he expanded on it more distinctly than previous authors did (e.g., Brentano, see Budd, 2005). It needs to be noted that the notion of intentionality developed by Husserl is not the same as intention, intentional, or intending, which, for example, Searle (1983, pp. 1–26) takes to be integral to intentionality. As Searle (1983) writes, "any explanation of intentionality, therefore, takes place within the circle of intentional concepts" (p. 26). Intentionality, or relationality, to borrow an expression of Giorgi (2012, p. 9), is the idea that there is no such thing as solipsistic or isolated consciousness. Intentionality comes from the Latin verb *intendere*, meaning to move toward, direct toward, etc. Intentionality therefore entails directedness, drivenness, extendedness, etc., as opposed to isolation, fixity, reclusion, etc. As Budd (2005) puts it so well,

Our consciousness – including the mental acts that accompany many of our perceptions – is not merely a blank slate on which phenomena write. Consciousness is intentional; it is directed; it has a purpose ... One of phenomenology's contributions to understanding and knowledge is its diminishing of the distance between the *cogito* (the thinking subject) and *cogitatum* (the content of thought) (pp. 46–47).

Budd (2005) also clarifies,

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