

Chapter 15

Considering Phenomenology in Virtual Work Research

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenology provides a framework for understanding the dynamic, complex processes of everyday lived experiences. We suggest that the virtual work environment is fertile ground to utilize a phenomenological approach. Centralizing the lived experiences of organizational members frames the utility of this method throughout this chapter. A historical discussion of the roots of phenomenology, its application to the virtual work environment, a potential research study, and recommended uses and limitations of this approach are offered in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The virtual workplace is an important site for extensive qualitative studies. Examining the “lived” experiences of those organizational members engaged in virtual work is of critical importance as organizations experience a radical structural shift in how work is constructed and accomplished. This chapter offers a critical need of using a phenomenological approach to the study of virtual work in all of its forms.

Phenomenology describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology is primarily concerned with exploring the structures of consciousness in human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). With the rapid expansion of the virtual workplace due to the internet and remote connectivity, organizations are taking new shapes and forms due to the increasing opportunities afforded by innovative and practical communication technologies. Organizational

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members no longer need to physically be in the same place to accomplish work goals. This rapid transition is fertile ground for qualitative researchers interested in phenomenological studies. By bringing sharp focus to the lived experiences of virtual workers, scholars and practitioners have an opportunity to forge new knowledge areas about virtual work and its impact on virtual employees and the organization.

What is Phenomenology? Husserl's Approach to Understanding Everyday Lived Experiences

Phenomenology provides a framework for understanding the dynamic, complex processes of everyday lived experiences. Simply put, phenomenology refers to the study of phenomena in the manner in which they are experienced by people. The experiences of the “everyday” significantly impact how people understand and respond to a variety of social phenomena. This approach challenges the belief in a single, objective external reality (see Craig, 1999; Craig & Muller, 2007). Phenomenologists believe that our sense of reality is rooted in our daily experiences. Through these experiences, we create our understanding of the world and can continually adjust these understandings as we have new and different experiences. Thus, reality is socially constructed and cannot be understood solely through detached, “objective” modes of study. From this perspective, events, ideas and concepts that were once conceived as natural are indeed products of human thought (Craig, 1999).

Although there are multiple lines of phenomenological inquiry, this perspective has conceptual foundations in German philosophy, particularly Husserl. Husserl challenged positivist notions of an external reality, but also eschewed ideas of a purely mentalist perspective that does not believe in a material reality (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992; Husserl, 1962; Spielberg,

1975). Our social experiences combine both objective *and* subjective positionalities that impact our conscious understandings of the numerous interactions we have with others. Our objective and subjective experiences cannot be understood in isolation, but in conjunction with each other. Phenomenology “links a phenomenon and being in an inseparable way: there is a phenomenon only when there is a subject who experiences the phenomenon” (Sadala & Adorno, 2002, p. 282). This perspective of the world, however, creates a paradox of consciousness relating to our objective and subjective perceptions of the social world. We have a concrete understanding of our own subjectivities, but understand others as objects (Husserl, 1962). We understand our experiences subjectively in the context of our experiences; however, we view the actions of others from a more detached stance as we attempt to make meaning of their actions.

Husserl sought ways to critically engage how we negotiate this paradox, as well as how he could frame ways to reintegrate what he labels the science world and the life world. He uses the notion of the life world to explain the prereflective and preobjective world. Our experiences drive our understandings of the “objective” world; therefore, before there can be pre-given knowledge or laws, there must be some type of experience drawn from to create social laws that can be empirically tested. Our common experiences of this world generate laws pertaining to particular phenomena. We use the laws generated from our experiences to categorize them by patterns and repetition associated with these phenomena and integrate them into our understanding of how they work or operate. We then repeat these patterns as we continue to experience the phenomena in the future.

Husserl asserts that we can understand how others make sense of their world through intentionality of consciousness and phenomenological reduction. All communicative actions have meaning, including both verbal utterances and

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