Chapter 6
Application and Contribution of Hermeneutic and Eidetic Phenomenology to Indigenous Knowledge Research

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars on indigenous research advocate research approaches that negate western research traditions. Although phenomenology is part and parcel of the classical western research approaches, it has the potential to offer indigenous researchers an approach of investigating the real world without invalidating indigenous voices and worldviews. Phenomenology with its emphasis on understanding and describing the phenomenon based on the human experience provides an opportunity of informing research practice in the field of indigenous knowledge. The phenomenological attitude helps in understanding the ultimate structure and essence of the life-world as experienced by participants without making any judgements or assumptions about their experiences. The participants take the centre-stage in phenomenological research approaches as they are viewed as co-researchers because of their extensive knowledge of an experience and its interpretation. This chapter demonstrates that phenomenology is a suitable approach for researching indigenous knowledge, which can complement available indigenous research pathways.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on phenomenology and its potential as a research approach for investigating indigenous contexts. The chapter outlines the background to research designs. The procedures of hermeneutic and eidetic phenomenology are detailed. The criteria for judging quality in phenomenological studies are presented. Possibilities and limitations of indigenous research are offered. The chapter also contains

an explanation of the relevance of phenomenology to indigenous knowledge systems research. The chapter is not an attempt to reinforce the notion that all indigenous ideas should be filtered through the western empirical lenses which have, hitherto, dominated the research and innovation enterprise in many developing countries. We concede that the western research approach may be useful in an indigenous context when the research employs an indigenous frame of reference during the conduct of research. That may assist researchers to come to grips with the influence of Eurocentric epistemology when doing indigenous research using approaches that evolved in the Western context. We are not claiming that phenomenological approaches are superior to indigenous research approaches. We are as acutely aware as Van Manen (1997) that there is no

...one correct or superior mode of inquiry to discover and ascertain the truth or the true meaning of something. There is no single method, just as there is no uncontested truth, Rather, the reason for reflecting on method is to discover the historical approaches and suppositions that may hold promise in rendering human experience interpretable and understandable... (p. 346).

Phenomenology evolved in the West as part and parcel of the interpretative scholarship. Phenomenology mainly focuses on contextualised and subjective lived experience of human beings, and then determines what is intersubjectively and collectively shared. A definition of experience deserves attention. Dewey (1958) characterised experience as including:

what men (read as human beings) do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine – in short processes of experiencing (p. 8).

Besides, the masculinist and sexist undertone, the definition captures the essence of an experience – the focus of phenomenological approaches. According to Van Manen (1990) the live experience that phenomenology is concerned with include: (i) lived space (spatiality); (ii) lived body (corporeality); (iii) lived time (temporality); and (iv) lived human relations (relationality). In that regard, phenomenology can be applied to "nearly any area of social research" (Eberle, 2014, p. 200), and "to research specific socio-cultural life-worlds" (Eberle, 2014, p. 195). Essentially, phenomenology is a powerful way of understanding human lived experience from the participants' perspective and interpretation. Phenomenology captures the "richness of human experience" from the participant's point of view "in ways that no other research approach does" (De Chesnay, 2015, p. xxi).

Multiple truths based on individual experiences partly constitute the indigenous worldview (Simpson, 2000). The richness of contextualised human experience is a strong feature of indigenous knowledge research, thus making it a suitable candidate for phenomenological investigation Phenomenology does not seem to be a dominant means in the pursuit of knowledge development in indigenous settings.

As a flexible research approach it may resonate with ways of knowing of those who are on the margins if used appropriately. Phenomenology with its emphasis on the principle of the phenomenological attitude[1] to arrive at the essence of human consciousness and understanding, (which is described later), may exhibits some of the traits of critical frameworks that advocate privileging:

...practice, politics, action, consequences, performances, discourses, methodologies of the heart, pedagogies of hope, love, care, forgiveness and healing (Pelias, 2004 cited in Denzin & Giardina, 2015, p. 17).

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