

## Revealing the “Essence” of Things: Using Phenomenology in LIS Research

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**Abstract.** Phenomenology is a recommended methodology when the study goals are to understand the *meanings* of human experiences or to explore concepts from new and fresh perspectives. However, existing methodology guidance is often conceptual and abstract. Few procedural instructions exist regarding data coding and interpretation. In this paper, the author reports on his experiences with phenomenology in two different studies. The first was a study of the meanings of “government publication” as perceived by government agency Web managers and digital depository librarians. The second explored why heterosexual women read Boys’ Love (BL) stories and what the pleasures were. The author explained how he combined data coding and interpretation techniques from grounded theory and other qualitative methods in the phenomenological analyses.

**Keywords** phenomenology, qualitative methodologies, data coding, government publications, Boys’ Love reading

### 1. Introduction

Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology. It is inspired by the branch of philosophy which concerns the phenomenon of human consciousness. Phenomenology is the reflective analyses of life-world experiences (Von Eckartsberg, 1986; Moustakas, 1994). It is a recommended methodology when the study goals are to understand the *meanings* of human experiences (Creswell, 1998) or to explore concepts from new and fresh perspectives (Sanders, 1982; Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). The methodology allows the researchers to reveal the “essence of things” and provides insights into social phenomenon.

Phenomenology as social science methodology has been used in psychology, education, nursing, and some LIS research. However, existing methodology guidance is often conceptual and abstract, focusing on the philosophical underpinning of the methodology. Few procedural instructions were given on

issues like how to code and interpret narrative data and how to generate analytic research findings. Consequently, novice researchers suffer from the lack of specific step-by-step guidance and need to resort to other qualitative methodology resources to guide their research decision-making. More discussions on the use of the methodology in different study topics and in different research contexts will greatly benefit the qualitative research community.

In this paper, I will describe my own research experiences with the methodology. I will explain how and why I strategically combined the conceptual and operational guidance from the phenomenology literature and the other qualitative methodology resources in two different LIS research projects. I do not claim my approach as correct or authoritative of phenomenology. The goal of this paper is to share my experiences with the qualitative research community and, hopefully, to stimulate more discussions on how to conduct good phenomenological analyses.

## 2. Phenomenology as a Qualitative Methodology

Phenomenology is a philosophy, a method, and an approach (Patton, 1990). As a philosophy, phenomenology concerns the phenomenon of human consciousness (Von Eckartsberg, 1986; Moustakas, 1994). As a scientific research methodology, phenomenological research focuses on the meanings of human experiences in situations as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life (Von Eckartsberg, 1986). A phenomenon can be an emotion, relationship, or an entity such as a program, an organization, or a culture. Phenomenologists ask the question: “What is the *essence* of experience of this phenomenon for those who experience it? (Patton, 1990)” Phenomenology seeks to expose the implicit structure and meaning of such experiences. It is the search for the “essence of things” that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation (Sanders, 1982; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological inquiry is motivated by both humanitarian and intellectual purposes. Phenomenologists strive for meaningful “human sciences” about individuals and societies rather than natural science-like knowledge (Sanders, 1982; Von Eckartsberg, 1986; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research that aims to reveal “what it means to be human” also helps professionals to develop sensitivity and empathy toward their patrons (McClelland, 1995; Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). Intellectually, phenomenology is powerful when the study goal is to explore a concept loaded with social and cultural meanings especially when the topic does not render itself easily to quantification, and when new and fresh perspectives are needed (Sanders, 1982; Heinrich, 1995; Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000)

Variations exist in phenomenological research. For example, *empirical phenomenology* assumes a *structure* exists in the shared experiences of a phenomenon, and the methodology strives to discover the structure and its *essential constituents* (Von Eckartsberg, 1986; Moustakas, 1994). On the other hand, *hermeneutic phenomenology* emphasizes on developing an authentic

description and interpretation of the study phenomenon from various forms of narratives, e.g., texts, oral records, artifacts (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000).

But underneath the variation is a shared assumption drawn from the philosophy of phenomenology. Phenomenologists reject the persistent dualism of “mind versus body” (or the traditional distinction between *object* and *subject*) in contemporary scientific thinking. Instead, phenomenology distinguishes *nouema* from *phenomena*. The former is the physical, unchanging, concrete things (objects), and the latter is individual human beings’ subjective apprehensions of the former. Because objects are conceivable only via human consciousness, phenomena are thus *the* reality of the world that we perceive. Phenomenological analysis is to examine the intentional correlation between *noema* (the “object” as experienced) and *noesis* (the “mode of experiencing”). Following that, phenomenology is by nature interpretive. The goal is to reveal the inherent, “transcendental nature” of a phenomenon through the methods of *phenomenological reduction*, an abstraction process (Sanders, 1982; Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology rejects the traditional objectivity measures imposed by the quantitative paradigm (Sanders, 1982; McClelland, 1995), but it is by no means a subjective approach that permits idiosyncratic explanations. As Crotty (1998) indicated, phenomenology is both objective and critical. Phenomenologists are not content with an individual’s subjective account of a phenomenon. Their goal is to discover the *universals* underlying the inter-subjectively experienced phenomenon. It is critical in that it problematizes those that are taken for granted and reveals the inherent structures that constitute and shape human experiences (Sanders, 1982; Crotty, 1998).

Existing methodology guidance on phenomenology is often conceptual and philosophical. The procedures for doing phenomenological analysis are also described metaphorically. For instance, the existing literatures suggest the researchers to take on three conceptual tasks, *epoche*, *eidetic reduction* (or *phenomenological reduction*), and *imaginative variation*.

#### *Epoche*

*Epoche* is the process to temporarily suspend the researcher’s existing personal biases, beliefs, preconceptions and assumptions about the phenomenon in order to get straight to the “pure and unencumbered vision of what it essentially is” (Chamberlain, 1974, cited in Sanders, 1982), or simply put, to go “back to the things themselves” (Crotty, 1998). It is also referred to as “*bracketing*” – a metaphorical use of the mathematical term. If one wants to bring another part of an equation/observation into focus, other parts are bracketed, leaving them constant but out of consideration (Sanders, 1982).

#### *Eidetic Reduction*

*Eidetic reduction* is the process to rid the phenomenon from its surface appearances to reveal the “core” (the word “*eido*” means “idea” or “form”, which means the “essence” of things). It involves a process of going beyond, behind, or underneath the conventional patterns of thoughts and action in order to expose the meaning structure (Sanders, 1982; Moustakas, 1994). Brooks (1980) describes eidetic reduction as extracting the attar of a rose: “As each

petal of the blossom is removed, another is fully revealed. The layers of the petals, blended one with the other into a potpourri, yield the attar—the essence of the rose. Each layer revealed by the eidetic reduction successively yields experience, the reflection of experience, until the invariants of experience yield the essence of meaning, that which is constant.” (Brooks, 1980, cited in Sanders, 1982)

#### *Imaginative Variation*

Imaginative variation is a procedure used to reveal possible meanings through utilizing imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions. The aim is to discover the underlying and precipitating factors accounting the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation complements eidetic reduction. The former eliminates the irrelevant, while the latter expands the scope of inspection to discover the veiled and the hidden.

In the following section, I will describe two studies in which I followed the three conceptual steps and combined other qualitative analysis techniques to do the actual data coding and interpretation. The first step, epoch or bracketing, was relatively straight forward. Prior to the initial interviewing, I firstly jotted down all my presumptions of the study topics (government publications and BL reading). The memo served as the basis for reflection and comparison in the later stages of analysis. I will focus more on the eidetic reduction and imaginative variation.

### **3. The First Study: the Meanings of Government Publications**

#### *The Study*

The first study was an exploratory investigation of the meanings of “government publication” as perceived by the American government agency Web managers and digital depository librarians. In this age of Web-based government information, digital preservation of government information for the historical record has become a challenge for libraries and archives. In the United States, some states have launched projects to capture and preserve Web-based government information. In those states where the state depository program took the lead, they continued to look for government Web content that looks like “publications” for inclusion in the digital depositories (Lin & Eschenfelder, 2008). That means the concept of government publications greatly influenced what was captured for long term preservation and what was likely to be lost in the highly publication-centered model. Consequently, the conceptualization of government publications fundamentally influenced the development of digital depositories.

Phenomenology is a great fit for the study the meanings of government publications for digital depository staff and government Web content managers, two key stakeholders whose conceptualization of government publications may significantly shape the collection development of the digital depositories. In my analysis, I followed the conceptual phenomenology guidance aforementioned, combined with the grounded theory analysis principles (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss

& Corbin, 1998) to facilitate my data coding. I further used cross-case comparison techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to compare and contrast the “meaning structures” of government publications for the two groups. The data was verbatim interview transcriptions. The interviews were conducted between November, 2006 and February, 2007 (9 digital depository staff; 7 agency Web managers; from four different states).

#### *The Phenomenological Analysis*

Phenomenological analysis is informed by intuition and reflection based on intensive and repetitive reading of the collected narratives. Introspection leads the eidetic reduction process (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, I began eidetic reduction with careful and repetitive reading of each interview transcript. I also employed the “open coding” technique from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify instances of interviewees’ perceptions of government publications contained in the transcripts.

Open coding is the identification of *concepts* and *categories* by segmenting data (e.g., interview transcriptions) into smaller units and labeling and describing their conceptual properties. It can be done word-by-word, line-by-line, by paragraphs, or by perusing of the whole document. A *concept* is a label for a discrete happening, event, or the other instance; a *category* is the grouping of related concepts pertinent to a certain aspect of the phenomenon under study. The purpose of open coding is to promote the generation of concepts from the data rather than from the researcher’s preconceptions. The researcher needs to group related concepts into categories and to articulate the properties of a category along some analytic dimensions, i.e., to *dimensionalize* the category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The open coding process fit well with the seeking for the “meaning structure” of government publications. The open coding process can be viewed as a form of complexity reduction, i.e., using descriptive codes to denote spoken narratives. That is exactly what eidetic reduction does. By using open coding, I was able to identify and differentiate different facets of the meaning structure. At the beginning stage, I tried to identify as many concept and category codes as possible, and the goal was to capture the nuances in narratives.

1. Use a key term appearing in a quotation as its *descriptive code*, whenever possible;
2. Use an already existing descriptive code only when it appears as an excellent fit;
3. Whenever an existing descriptive code might fail to capture perceived nuances in a quotation, use a new descriptive code using that particular quotation’s key terms;
4. When in doubt, use a new descriptive code.

Imaginative variation also played a huge role in the open coding process. Moustakas (1994) recommended the following principles to enhance the analyst’s sensitivity: (1) systematic varying of possible structural meanings underlying the narratives of experiences; (2) seeking the underlying themes and contexts that account for the phenomenon; (3) considering the universal structural properties and attributes of the phenomenon, such as temporality,

spatiality, materiality, causality, etc; (4) looking for exemplifications that illustrate the invariant structural themes. These were used in the early stage of data coding. For instance, a segment of interview transcript read like this:

Public perspective would mean that it is meant for the public – the general public – to learn about, to provide a historical perspective, and to learn about the programs and the workings of state government (by a digital depository staffer)

One can interpret and reinterpret this short quotation from different angles. First, it alluded to content requirements for eligible Web content. Secondly, it also referred to an *intended audience* (the general public) and the *function of the Web content* (for the public to know/learn, or for the government to inform/advise/educate). Finally, it suggested a *collection perspective* that conceptualizes individual pieces of Web content as part of a larger collectivity with temporal significance. This example shows how imaginative variation helped uncover hidden frames of reference.

At about half way through the transcripts, I began to consolidate and eliminate redundant codes. The coding principles were modified accordingly:

1. Use a consolidated descriptive code when it appears as a good fit;
2. Whenever an existing consolidated code fails to capture perceived nuances in a quotation, establish a new code;
3. When in doubt, prefer the consolidated descriptive codes.

After all the interview transcripts were coded, I categorized the codes by the prominent structural dimensions and compared the meaning structures for the two key stakeholder groups. At this stage, Miles and Huberman’s (1994) cross-case displays techniques were used to visualize the data and facilitate comparisons. A sample of the comparison tables is as Table 1.

	1	2	1	2	1	2	C3
<b>Origin</b>							
N: [Birth] as end products of agency works							
N: [Birth] as by-products of agency works							
N: [Birth] required by laws							X
N: [Birth] paid by tax money							X
N: [Birth] published by gov or gov-affiliations							X
N: [Birth] authorized/endorsed by agencies							
<b>Entity</b>							
N: [Entity] a group of information being put together							X
N: [Entity] media are just container of information							
N: [Entity] distinct objects							
N: [Entity] print-like or printable digital objects							
N: [Entity] can see an beginning and an end							

**Table 1.** A Sample Comparison Table Using the Cross-Case Display Technique *Note.* All of the points were explicitly mentioned (denoted by X) or implied in the transcripts.

The analysis revealed two different meaning structures for digital depository librarians and government agency Web managers. For digital depository librarians, the meaning of government publication is much more dynamic and flexible than that of agency staffers. And the librarians' conceptualization of government publication always embedded a collection perspective that views a specific content from the entire universe of government information. Those who are interested in the detailed findings are referred to Lin (2007) and Lin & Eschenfelder (2010).

#### **4. The Second Study: the Pleasures of BL Reading**

##### *The Study*

The second study was an investigation on why heterosexual women read Boys' Love (BL) stories and what pleasures they got from BL reading. In recent years, the genre of Boys' Love has become popular among female readers in the Asian countries especially in Japan, China, and Taiwan. BL stories are love stories of two or more male characters created predominantly by women for women, and the female fandom is predominantly heterosexual. This blooming genre of texts, images, and other forms of creation is also known as *Danmei* ("indulgence in beauty") in the Chinese and Japanese speaking regions, or as *YAOI* or "slash fiction" in the Western world. The genre names of *Danmei* and *YAOI*, which originated from the Chinese and Japanese languages, express a sense that women readers see love between males as beautiful, romantic, and adorable. BL is different from gay literatures. For BL fans, it is fantasies created by and for women. It is different from literary works that describe and reflect on the real-world homosexual relationships.

Why do female readers find BL stories beautiful – so beautiful that many are deeply addicted to the genre? What pleasure do women get from reading and creating BL stories? Informal theories have been speculated by outsiders who tend to pathologize BL reading, criticizing BL readers as gullible and superficial. Systematic investigation on the BL readership is rarely seen. This exploratory study thus employed interpretive qualitative methodologies to empirically analyze the reading experiences, motivations, and types of pleasures of 26 adult female readers in Taiwan, aged between 18 years old and 40s. Their occupations ranged from university students, office workers, teachers and college professors. Some are married women with children. Most of them are also engaged in the creation of BL stories.

##### *The Phenomenological Analysis*

At the outset of this study, I followed the methodological guidance of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and observed the BL phenomenon without pre-defined research questions. I followed the "epoch" principle of phenomenology and wrote down what I knew about BL, then began the first batch of interviews (6 interviewees in four sessions). The interview questions were on the reasons and motivations for BL reading, how the interviewees developed the taste for BL, and what they liked and disliked about BL and the BL fandom, etc.

As my understanding of BL and BL fandom grew, the research focus gradually shifted to identifying and describing the different facets of reading pleasure. The major reason for the shift was that, for many interviewees, it wasn't easy to articulate the reasons for their addiction to BL. However, I found a possibility to extrapolate the motivations and/or the reinforcement for BL reading when the female interviewees described different pleasures of and satisfaction from BL reading. I therefore reset the research goal to differentiate different types of reading pleasures from reading BL. Phenomenology became a great fit for this inquiry because, similar to the seeking of a "meaning structure" for government publications, I was looking for a typology, or a "structure", that can represent and reflect the rather diverse reading pleasures reported by the informants.

Phenomenology is consistent with the epistemological stand of the investigation. To begin with, I had intended to study BL reading in an "unpathologizing" fashion as McClelland (1995) advocated. Phenomenology benefited the analysis in that it required the researcher to constantly reflect on his perceptions and presumptions. It also mandated an unjudgmental attitude toward the participants' narratives. It required the researcher to see the phenomenon in the informants' shoes. For instance, when an interviewee said that she read BL because all female characters in the traditional man-woman romances were idiotic, I was not to agree or disagree with this statement. Neither did I try to verify if this statement was true. What I did was to understand what she meant by that statement, in what context, and out of what personal characteristics or living experiences did she develop such a view.

The eidetic reduction and imaginative variation principles were again used in my open coding of the verbatim interview transcripts. Similar rules were again used in this analysis. That is, at the earlier stage, I tried to draw as many descriptive codes using the participants' words. When the code list became too long and redundant, I shifted to more stringent rules and began to consolidate and eliminate codes.

The axial coding techniques from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) further assisted my analysis in relating different types of reading pleasures to the causes, situations, contexts, and mechanisms of such pleasures. Axial coding is a process in which the analyst treats a category as an axis and delineates the relationships and dimensions related to this category (Charmaz, 2006). For example, of the five different types of reading pleasures that I identified, I labeled one as "the pleasure of resistance and defiance". The emergence of this pleasure type was the result of systematic open coding and axial coding. The latter helped to clarify the property of each pleasure type, and in this case, it revealed two different reasons for such pleasures: one being the rejection to gender stereotyping, and the other being a resistance to patriarchy and male dominance. The female readers enjoyed reading about men and women whose behavior and personality do not conform to the traditional gender norms. They also enjoyed reading about a romantic relationship in which the two parties were equal. The interviewees often loathed the patriarchy and resonated with such relationships in which the male lovers are equally strong and beautiful and look



after each other. The findings of this study are will be published in a forthcoming paper.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I described my experiences with phenomenology in two different LIS studies and showed how I combined the grounded theory coding techniques and cross-case comparison technique in the methodological endeavor. For me, the existing literatures of phenomenology provided a sound philosophical and conceptual foundation for researchers to interpret the narrative data. At the operation level, techniques from the other qualitative methods can be very useful for the analysts to parse the data and derive theoretically sound research findings. Future phenomenology analysts may continue to experiment with more different combinations of qualitative techniques, and more experience sharing will greatly benefit the qualitative research community.

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