Chapter Three

Method of Inquiry: Phenomenology in General

Introduction to Phenomenology

Phenomenology is complex in that it refers to a philosophical tradition as well as a methodology (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). "In its broadest sense, phenomenology refers to a person's construction of the meaning of a phenomenon, as opposed to the phenomenon as it exists external to the person. The phenomenon experienced and/or studied may be an event, a relationship, an emotion, or even an educational program" (Leedy, 1997, p.161). "Phenomenological researchers, particularly those of a descriptive bent, focus on what an experience means for persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Schram, 2006, p.98). The underlying assumption is that through conversation and reflection with persons who have had a particular experience, the researcher is able to glean the essence or fundamental meaning of an experience regardless of which "specific individual has had that experience" (Schram, p.99). "The goal of phenomenology is to describe lived experience" (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p.77).

Schram (2006) identifies five basic assumptions of phenomenologists:

1) Human behavior occurs and is understandable only in the context of relationships to things, people, events, and situations
2) Perceptions present us with evidence of the world, not as the world is thought to be but as it is lived. Thus, understanding the everyday life of a group of people is a matter of understanding how those people perceive and act upon objects of experience
3) The reality of anything is not "out there" in an objective or detached sense but is inextricably tied to one's consciousness of it. Phenomenologists discuss this idea in terms of the intentionality of consciousness. Accordingly, you cannot develop an understanding of a phenomenon apart from understanding people's experience of or with that phenomenon.
4) Language is the central medium through which meaning is constructed and conveyed. Thus, the meaning of a particular aspect of experience can be revealed through dialogue and reflection.

5) It is possible to understand and convey the essence, or central underlying meaning, of a particular concept or phenomenon as experienced by a number of individuals. This premise is associated primarily with descriptive phenomenology, an approach that rests on the thesis that essential structures constitute any human experience. (p.99)

Rationale for Phenomenology

Phenomenology as a method of inquiry was appropriate to this study as I was seeking to understand the lived experience of persons who have completed a dual degree program in social work and divinity. I was interested in the everyday life of dual degree graduates in the context of how they have combined social work with ministry. Specifically, I was interested in the lived experiences of graduates while they were in the dual degree program. In keeping with phenomenological principles, the phenomenon of dual degree programs cannot be understood apart from understanding the experiences of graduates. I was interested in discovering the essence or fundamental meaning of the experience of dual degree graduates as a group regardless of which schools participants attended.

History of Phenomenology

The boundaries between phenomenological philosophy and methodology become so blurred that it is difficult at times to distinguish phenomenological philosophers from methodologists. Part of the difficulty is that phenomenology is a philosophical tradition that undergirds most qualitative inquiry (Hatch, 2002). Although many people have contributed to the philosophy of phenomenology, there are some key persons who stand out in the literature. Edmund Husserl is widely credited as the first phenomenological philosopher (Jones et al., 2006; Sokolowski, 2000; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Husserl drew on the work of Franz Brentano (who wrote on the many senses of being in Aristotle) and Carl Stumpf (a psychologist and student of Brentano) (Sokolowski; Speziale & Carpenter). Yet, Husserl's work far exceeded that of Brentano and Stumpf (Sokolowski). The German phase of phenomenology is attributed to the

work of Husserl (1857-1938), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Max Scheler and Hans-Georg Gadamer are also included in this phase (Jones et al.; Sokolowski 2000). The concepts of essences, intuiting, and phenomenological reduction came out of this phase (Speziale & Carpenter). The French phase includes the work of Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). "The primary concepts developed during this phase were embodiment and being-in-the-world" (Speziale & Carpenter, p.80).

Much of the literature on phenomenology focuses on the core elements shared by philosophers. Yet, each philosopher did form a slightly different school of thought: "Gadamer's work focused on the philosophical and historical; Husserl, on transcendental psychology; Heidegger, on hermeneutic phenomenology; and Merleau-Ponty, on existential phenonomenology" (Jones et al., 2006, p.46). Research in education tends to represent hermeneutic phenomenology or "the science of interpretation" (Jones et al., p.46). All forms of phenomenology take a constructivist approach believing that multiple realities exist that are socially constructed. Since there are different realities, it is important to study the meaning individuals give to their experiences.

Heidegger's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an umbrella term under which there are different schools of thought that overlap yet offer distinctions (R. Sloan, personal communication, November 12, 2008). This project utilized the philosophical principles of Martin Heidegger as a foundation for hermeneutic methodology. Leonard (1994) provides an excellent framework for understanding Heidegger's concept of the person of which there are five key facets including:

1) Persons as having a world.
2) The person as a being for whom things have significance and value.

3) The person as self interpreting.
4) The person as embodied.
5) The person in time. (Leonard, 1994, p. 46-54)

Persons as having a world.

Researchers engaging in Heideggerian hermeneutic inquiry assume that human communities share an understanding of their lived experiences that is shaped by culture, language, and other social practices. This is not simply to imply that all persons hold the same understandings, but to indicate that understandings are shaped by experiences in particular worlds." (Baker, Norton, Young & Ward, 1998, p.549)

For example, social workers share a common understanding regarding social work history, culture, language, educational requirements, and practice roles, i.e., the *world* of social work. Social workers can carry on conversations regarding the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics as social workers all share an understanding of those ethics and the importance of following ethical guidelines. The concept of world view can refer to any human community that shares a common understanding regarding life experiences, history, language and beliefs. The list of communities containing a world view is endless as all human beings participate in many communities based on race, gender, geographic location, economic status, marital status, religious affiliation, and profession/career. Any phenomenological interpretation is then grounded in this understanding of a world view (Baker, et.al., 1998). It is important to note, that when Heidegger wrote about the concept of world view, he was referring to persons in the context of *a* world view (R. Sloan, personal communication, November 4, 2009).

Included in Heidegger's concept of persons as having a world, is also the concept of "thrownness" (Leonard, 1994). This means that persons are "thrown" into a particular place in time, race and culture, economic status, geographic location and family at birth. One's personal concept of self is established within the confines of the culture, world, into which they were

born. "In other words, world sets up possibilities for who a person can become and who she cannot become" (Leonard, p.48).

The concept of "thrownness' also refers to situations into which a person is thrown. For example, anyone who has dealt with a chronic illness understands what it means to be suddenly thrown into a world surrounded by medical doctors, language, procedures, equipment, paperwork, etc. (Sloan, 2002). Pember (2002) chronicles her experiences of being thrown into the world of the Civil War. Pember served as matron of the Confederate Chimborazo Hospital during the war and poignantly describes how basic luxuries and supplies grew scarce over the course of the war creating a new world order.

When one is thrown into a new world one often experiences the Heideggarian principle of "breakdown." A person's concept of world is typically so pervasive that it is overlooked until there is some form of "breakdown" (Leonard, 1994). There are so many aspects to one's language, culture, station in life, and general worldview that one is unaware of them until they are gone. The recent events at Fort Hood, Texas, where a United States serviceman opened fire and killed 13 persons on a U.S. military base provide an excellent example of "breakdown." Many people on the base at the time of the shooting had loved ones serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The comment was frequently made that military personnel expect to be in danger or fear for their lives when they are stationed in a foreign country in a perceived war zone. They do not expect to be killed on a U.S. military base which is perceived to be safe and where one is surrounded by allies. Hence, there was a significant sense of "breakdown."

The person as a being for whom things have significance and value.

Heideggerian phenomenologists study persons in context. Empirical research treats variables such as anxiety in pregnancy as something that is context free (Leonard, 1994).

However, anxiety in pregnancy varies greatly among pregnant women because pregnancy and motherhood can hold different meanings based on whether the pregnancy was planned, accidental, or the result of a forced sexual encounter. Understanding anxiety in pregnancy will vary greatly depending on the circumstances i.e., *world* of the pregnant woman. The significance then of women's anxiety during pregnancy changes based on the context in which women experience anxiety.

Sloan (2002) interviewed patients on their experiences of using a dialysis machine. Medical personnel and many patients perceive dialysis machines as life saving devices. Yet, Sloan found that many patients experienced the dialysis machine as "killing them." For patients in this group, the dialysis machine signified a loss of self, and a normal lifestyle. The significance of the dialysis machine was predicated upon the context of the patient's world view.

The person as self interpreting.

According to Heidegger, human beings are engaged in "interpretive understanding" in the context of our "linguistic and cultural traditions" (Leonard, 1994, p.52). For example, Caudill and Weinstein (1969) studied Japanese and American babies and found "that by the age of 4 months the babies studied had become distinctly Japanese or American" (Leonard, p.52). "In the phenomenological view, then, persons can never perceive 'brute facts' out there in the world. Nothing can be encountered independent of our background understanding. Every encounter is an interpretation based on our background" (Leonard, p.52).

The person as embodied.

From the standpoint of phenomenology, people do not have bodies, but rather are embodied (Leonard, 1994). Bodies are not simply some object machine. We gain access to the world through our bodies. It is our bodies and our senses that make us conscious of experiences

(Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). When illness occurs, it impacts the patient's ability to negotiate

the world (Leonard). The problem is not the breakdown in a machine, but instead the patient's

embodiment which must now be renegotiated. Leonard argues that nurses understand more than

medical doctors the need for patients to "reclaim that sense of embodiment that allows for their

taken-for-granted, unselfconscious transactions with the world" (p.53).   Likewise, social

workers working with clients who have experienced some form of physical trauma, i.e. child

abuse, rape, domestic violence or the affects of war understand that physical trauma does not

affect the body as if it was an object machine. Instead, clients experience the physical trauma in

ways that impact their cognitions, emotions, and spiritual beliefs, their entire sense of self.

Therefore,

a significant part of the therapeutic healing process centers around helping clients renegotiate a

world in which their bodies hold painful memories.

The person in time.

Traditional Western notions of time are linear in nature (Leonard, 1994, p.53). Under

this paradigm, time is viewed as a series of nows that are unrelated yet belong to one another in a

successive way. In contrast, Heidegger viewed time as essential to being. The Heideggerian

concept of "being in time" can only be understood in the context of "having- been-ness and

being expectant" (Leonard, p.54).

> To return to the example of anxiety in pregnancy, the older pregnant woman with career
> commitments has a having-been-ness that includes, perhaps, insisting on doing things
> with great precision and care. Her having-been-ness has also included much rumination
> on whether an infant can be left in the care of a nonparent while the parents both return to
> work full time. Her being-expectant includes and awareness that her company expects
> her to return to work full time as an equally functioning member of the "team." Her
> anxiety in pregnancy, then, can be seen as being constituted by her past and future.
> (Leonard, 1994, p. 54)

Heidegger and Theology

Heidegger's philosophy was also heavily influenced by his experiences with and understanding of theology (Caputo, 2006). Heidegger was raised in a devoutly Catholic family and was groomed for the priesthood until 1911 when his health prevented him from continuing his studies. His theological and philosophical thinking went through different phases and was influenced by the World Wars (Caputo). As a philosophy and subsequent methodology, one of the fundamental aspects of Heideggerian phenomenology is its focus on essences or themes that emerge from studying the lived experiences of persons and give subsequent meaning to a particular phenomenon.

In keeping with this pattern of thought, Heidegger sought to demythologize Christianity which heavily influenced his work on Being and Time (Caputo, 2006; Heidegger, 1962). Demythologizing entails sorting out the themes of Christianity regarding care, decision, and authenticity from cosmic myths about heaven and hell as places above and below the earth and heavenly messengers who move among these places (Caputo). Heidegger focused on the fact that although we know little of the "historical" Jesus, we know a great deal about the earliest communities of His followers. These communities' stories of Jesus "contain the essence of the Christian message, the saving truth" (Caputo, p.331). "The task of theology, armed now with the Heideggerian analytic of existence, is to deconstruct and demythologize the canonical Gospels in order to retrieve their *kerygman*, the living-existential Christian message, one of existential conversion (metanoia), of becoming authentic in the face of our finitude and guilt, a task that faces every human being" (Caputo, p.331). Many Christian theologians including Paul Tillich (a colleague of Heidegger's) have been influenced by Heidegger's works (Caputo). Tillich

emphasizes a conversational theology (Williamson, 1999) which is in keeping with Heidegger's emphasis on conversing with research participants' narratives (Baker et. al., 1998).

Heideggerian Phenomenology Methodology/Procedures

Theory assumes a different role in hermeneutical phenomenology. The focus is on understanding the phenomenon based on meanings that arise out of the lived experience of those engaging in the phenomenon (Leonard, 1994). The phenomenological researcher does not make theoretical assumptions or predictions. Hermeneutical theory simply seeks to reveal meanings associated with practical knowledge that is left hidden in empirical research approaches (Leonard). Heidegger's phenomenology is concerned with ontology: "what does it mean to *be* a person and how is the world intelligible to us at all?" (Leonard, p. 46). Phenomenology then explores "what it means to be a person in a particular situation at a particular time" (Sloan, 2002, p.124). This was fitting for this particular study which sought to understand what it means for graduates to *be* persons with dual degrees navigating the world of social work and the world of ministry while experiencing the particular situation (world) of a dual degree program. For Heidegger, "human beings are always already in the world as interpreters of experience" (Sloan, p.128).

Drawing on Heidegger's view of the person, phenomenological methodology assumes that "the researcher has a preliminary understanding of the human action being studied. It is by virtue of our world that we, as researchers, have the questions we have, and that we see the possibilities we see" (Leonard, 1994, p.57). Forestructure is the term Heidegger used to describe preunderstanding and it contains three aspects (Leonard, 1994). First, is fore-having which refers to the background practices that make us familiar with a phenomenon (Diekelmann & Ironside, 2006). Second, fore-sight refers to the particular interpretive lens through which we

approach our research question (Leonard). This conceptual framework provides the means for gaining access to the phenomenon. Fore- conception is the final aspect of the forestructure: "there is always a preliminary sense of what counts as a question and what would count as an answer" (Leonard, p.57).

Equipped with this preunderstanding the researcher enters the phenomenological study with the goal being to "borrow' other people's experiences. We gather other people's experiences because they allow us, in a vicarious sort of way, to become more experienced ourselves" (Van Manen, 2008, retrieved under heading "empirical methods"). Specific means for gathering data on experiences include a) protocol writing (which includes having research participants write an account of their experiences; b) interviewing participants; c) observing; and d) studying descriptions of experiences found in various forms of literature and art (Hatch, 2002).

Phenomenological methodology is more conversational than instrumental in that the emphasis is on narratives (R. Sloan, personal communication, November 12, 2008). Consequently, researchers enter interviews with a limited set of broad, overarching questions and then ask many spontaneous questions based on the participant's narrative (R. Sloan, personal communication, November 12, 2008). Consistency occurs not so much in the specific questions but in the analysis of the narratives. Phenomenological researchers look for themes or patterns that cut across interviews (Diekelmann & Ironside, 2006). "A theme is a recurrent category that reflects the shared experiences and practices embedded in the interview texts" (Diekelmann, 2001, p.56). The goal is to reveal previously hidden interpretations through continuous engagement with participants' narratives (Baker, et. al., 1998). The focus is on *understanding*

anything that is uncovered rather than focusing on an empirically correct interpretation (Baker, et. al.).

This leads to another assumption of Heideggerian phenomenology: the interpretive process is circular in nature (Leonard, 1994). The research process juxtaposes parts with the whole in a hermeneutical circle. The researcher looks at the lived experiences of participants to gain a deeper understanding, in other words, pick out the themes or essences of what is already known about the whole phenomenon. The researcher then reexamines the whole in light of new insights gained from the parts. "The interpretive process follows this part-whole strategy until the researcher is satisfied with the depth of his or her understanding. Thus, the interpretive process has no clear termination" (Leonard, p.57). For example, we cannot understand the term sadness without describing a situation that is sad and our response to the situation. Our understanding exists in a circular fashion where the situation, feeling and reaction all refer back to each other.

Hermeneutical phenomenology also assumes that there is no atemporal, ahistorical, objective (in the traditional sense) view of the world because the researcher also has a world that exists in historical time (Leonard, 1994). Meanings are objective in the sense that they are shared and verifiable between research participants and the researcher. "The fact that researchers bring their experiences and presuppositions to the interpretation does not contaminate the interpretation but makes it meaningful" (Baker, et.al., 1998, p. 550). Therefore, hermeneutic phenomenologists "do not attempt to isolate or 'bracket' their presuppositions but rather to make them explicit" (Diekelmann & Ironside, 2006, 261). This practice of making explicit any assumptions or preconceptions is referred to as decentering (Munhall, 2007).

In keeping with Heidegger's hermeneutical circle, data analysis is not linear but occurs in a helical fashion. Sloan (2002) identifies three moments when interpretation occurs

Moment 1. "In the moment" interpretations occur simultaneously with gathering the original narrative
Moment 2. Interpretations of each individual narrative as an entity to itself
Moment 3. Interpretations of an ensemble of narratives collected across a life's work (to date) of inquiry. (p. 129)

During "moment 1," researchers clarify with the participant the meaning of what is said. Researchers also keep field notes regarding each interview in regard to thoughts and observations. When typing up transcripts from interviews for "moment 2," any observations regarding body language or non-verbal expressions are added to give as much information regarding the original interview as possible. This is important as it is during moment 2 that each individual transcript is analyzed alone for what is contained within that single narrative (Sloan, 2002). It is during the 3rd "moment" that narratives are analyzed collectively to reveal patterns of meaning shared by all interviews.

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