



## Criticism of the Phenomenological Approach (Understanding the Limits of Subjectivity and Objectivity in Research)

Silvia Annisa\*<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Sumatera Utara, 20155, Medan

\*Corresponding Author: [silviaannisa2022@gmail.com](mailto:silviaannisa2022@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the idea that in addition to criticism of objectivity, phenomenology is also often criticized for its limitations in generalizing findings, because its focus on unique individual experiences tends to ignore the social, cultural, and historical contexts that may influence those experiences which makes it difficult to generalize phenomenological findings to broader population, and limits its relevance in more general theory development. The phenomenological method has several advantages, such as exploring deep meaning and understanding, and allowing data to be explored holistically. However, there are several criticisms regarding this approach, apart from criticism of objectivity, phenomenology is also often criticized for limitations in generalizing findings. This article uses the literature study method to explore research objectives, using articles, books and other reference sources. This article criticizes the phenomenological approach to qualitative research in the view of Edmund Husserl.

**Keyword:** Phenomenology, Husserl, Criticism

### ABSTRAK

Paper ini menggambarkan tentang gagasan bahwa selain kritik terhadap objektivitas, fenomenologi juga sering dikritik karena keterbatasan dalam menggeneralisasi temuan, karena fokusnya pada pengalaman individu yang unik cenderung mengabaikan konteks sosial, budaya, dan sejarah yang mungkin mempengaruhi pengalaman tersebut yang membuat sulit untuk menggeneralisasi temuan fenomenologis pada populasi yang lebih luas, dan membatasi relevansinya dalam pengembangan teori yang lebih umum. Metode fenomenologi memiliki beberapa kelebihan seperti menggali makna dan pemahaman mendalam, serta memungkinkan data tereksplorasi secara holistik. Namun ada beberapa kritik terkait pendekatan itu, selain kritik terhadap objektivitas, fenomenologi juga sering dikritik karena keterbatasan dalam menggeneralisasi temuan. Artikel ini menggunakan metode studi literatur untuk menggali tujuan penelitian, dengan menggunakan artikel, buku dan sumber referensi lainnya. Artikel ini mengkritisi pendekatan fenomenologis penelitian kualitatif dalam pandangan Edmund Husserl.

**Kata Kunci:** Fenomenologi, Husserl, Kritik



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### 1. Introduction

Phenomenology, with its focus on the unique and subjective experiences of individuals, offers a different way of understanding reality compared to traditional, more positivistic research methods. It allows researchers to delve deeper into the experiences of individuals, and to understand how they interpret and give meaning to the world around them. This phenomenological approach is valuable in a variety of disciplines. In the social sciences, phenomenology can be used to understand how people experience social phenomena such as poverty, discrimination, or migration. In psychology, phenomenology can be used to understand how people experience emotions, trauma, or mental illness. And in education, phenomenology can be used to understand how students experience learning, teaching, and schooling. Phenomenology has long been an important research method in a variety of disciplines. It offers a way to understand individuals' experiences in a deep and holistic way, focusing on the meaning and understanding they give to those experiences.

Phenomenology is a qualitative type of research method, and emphasizes the importance of systematic study of subjective experience. In this case, phenomenological research is an attempt to understand the world and ourselves, understanding the world based on experience and its objects. Phenomenological research proceeds through objective and methodological analysis of how individuals experience things as emergent, real, or making themselves known, whether those things are other people, animals, objects, events, or ideas (Frey, 2018).

Qualitative researchers emphasize subjective thinking because according to their view the world is dominated by dreams which are symbolic rather than concrete (Subadi, 2006). If researchers use a phenomenological perspective with a social definition paradigm, the research usually moves to micro studies. Phenomenology is an attempt to depart from the scientific method which assumes that people do not know the existence of a reality in actual lived experience as the basic data of a reality. Phenomenology also studies and describes the intrinsic characteristics of symptoms which reveal themselves to consciousness. Phenomenology explains the structure of consciousness in human experience and the phenomenological approach seeks to let reality reveal itself naturally through provoking questions, research subjects are allowed to tell all kinds of dimensions of their experiences related to a phenomenon or event (Hasbiansyah, 2008).

According to Hegel, the word '*phenomenology*' comes from the word phenomenon (phainomai, to appear) and logos (reason) and among phenomenologists much importance is attached to this etymology. Whatever 'appears' appears in actual experience; there is no emergence of the 'inexperienced'. Therefore, the aim of phenomenology is described as the study of experience with the aim of bringing out the 'essence', the underlying 'reason'. This definition is very broad and tells us nothing about how the study is or should be conducted, but it gives a sufficient indication of where the scope of phenomenological inquiry lies. It lies in the domain of experience. Philosophically, the word '*phenomenology*' became famous through Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which was published in 1807 and compiled by Hegel as an introduction to his philosophical system. Hegel was studying the pattern of evolution of knowledge from the lowest and simplest forms of consciousness to the highest and most sophisticated. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he provides a systematic account of the various forms of consciousness presenting them in a world historical perspective. He interpreted them as stages in the evolution of the 'World Spirit' throughout World History. He describes in his *Phenomenology* the '*journey*' of consciousness towards what he calls 'absolute knowledge'; knowledge, namely that the Spirit ultimately derives its own development, from its own past (Pivčević, 2015).

According to San Martín (1986), various periods of time are necessary in the development of phenomenological analysis. Moreover, its importance is to provide conditions for new knowledge as well as to suspend natural conditions. It is purported to see the world and its objects as fragments of conscious experience that give meaning. Martín implies that it is worth remembering the tendency of consciousness to see the world as it is already constituted and to forget its own activities, to make them anonymous. Phenomenon arises as an analysis of significant phenomena or experiences shown (phenomenon) to consciousness. This has a distance from the knowledge of the object itself which is socialized from experience. For this approach, the most important point is to understand that the phenomenon is part of a significant whole and there is no possibility of analysing it without a holistic approach and in relation to the experiences one has and experiences (Guillen, 2019).

The phenomenological approach is widely used in studying religion, usually called religious phenomenology. In terms of phenomena, Husserl invites a return to the source or true reality. For this, methodical steps of reduction or placing the phenomenon in baskets (bracketing) or parentheses are required. In reduction there is a delay in efforts to conclude something from any prejudices about reality, the steps in this method are eidetic reduction, phenomenological reduction and transcendental reduction (Sukidin, 2002). In other words, phenomenology must return to data, not to thoughts, namely to the things themselves that reveal themselves. The researcher must let go of his personal assumptions and beliefs and look sympathetically at the object that directs him (this step is called *epoche*). Through this process, the object of knowledge is released from its temporary, non-essential elements so that only the *eidōs* (the essence of the object) remains to reveal itself or constitute itself in consciousness. With regard to *epoche* and eidetic vision, this is what is being debated in the phenomenology of religion (Sudiarja-Terjemahan, 1995).

Consciousness according to Husserl is always awareness of something, therefore consciousness has two aspects that coexist, namely the conscious process (process of being conscious=*cogito*) and the object of consciousness itself (*cogitatum*). In this way, awareness is closely related to the individual's intention. With the presence of intention in awareness, awareness always gives meaning to the object at hand. Awareness that contains this intention is always directed at the field of life (life world), and this field is an

intersubjective world, which means that humans in that world are interconnected so that the awareness formed between them has a social nature. Personal experiences in that world and also the experiences of other people are shared experiences (Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra, 1985).

Moustakas then goes on to present Husserl's ideas about transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to eliminate everything that represents prejudice or guesswork. This requires looking at things openly, undisturbed by the natural habits of the world. The challenge is to describe things as they are, to understand their meaning and essence in the light of intuition and self-reflection. Meaning is created when such objects appear in our consciousness, mingling with objects in nature: "what appears in consciousness is absolute reality while what appears in the world is the product of learning" Moustakas explains that an act of consciousness and an object of consciousness are intentionally related things one another. Therefore, intuition is very important in describing everything that arises by itself. In his transcendental philosophy, Husserl preferred to use intuition rather than deduction.

Husserl's main thoughts about phenomenology are as follows; First, phenomena are reality itself which appears. second, there is no boundary between subject and reality. Third, consciousness is intentional. Fifth, there is an interaction between the act of awareness (noesis) and the object of awareness (noema). The phenomenon of religion itself appears to be trying to move away from these narrow, ethnocentric and normative approaches. He attempts to describe religious experiences as accurately as possible. In describing, analysing and interpreting meaning, he attempts to suspend judgment about what is real or unreal in other people's experiences. He seeks to describe, understand and do justice to religious phenomena as they appear in other people's religious experiences (Ahmad Norma, 2000).

Another contribution of Husserl's thought to social science was his view of natural attitude. This concept connects phenomenological philosophy with sociology. Through this concept, Husserl stated that an Ego who is in a certain situation usually uses practical reasoning, such as in everyday life. The ego no longer questions in detail what is around it. He considered what he faced to be no different from the same thing he had encountered before. This natural attitude is also called commonsense reality. By Husserl, this natural attitude is distinguished from theoretical attitude and mythical religious attitude. With this difference, Husserl laid down one of the main ideas which was later developed by Alfred Schutz, and continued by Harold Garfinkel in ethnomethodology. There they connect this attitude with whether or not the social interaction process can occur (Leiter, 1980).

## **2. Method**

The method used is literature review, with secondary data coming from journals, books, regional education balances, and district education report cards. The literature review method aims to explain the topic, investigate the findings, provide recommendations (Neuman, 2013). The author then describes the findings in depth. This article examines Edmund Husserl's thoughts from various sources, articles, media, books, and so on. This article uses reading material that raises the topic of the definition of phenomenology, its advantages, and explains its disadvantages.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

Edmund Husserl is the founder and main figure of the phenomenological school of philosophy. In his early days Husserl attempted to develop radical philosophy, or a school of philosophy that explored the roots of knowledge and experience. This problem is driven by distrust of positivism which is considered to have failed to make life more meaningful because it is unable to consider issues of value and meaning. Phenomenology was born as a reaction to Auguste Comte's positivistic methodology. The positivistic approach always relies on a set of objective social facts based on visible symptoms, so it tends to see phenomena only from the surface, so it is considered unable to understand the meaning behind a phenomenon. Phenomenology departs from a subjectivist mindset which does not only look at visible symptoms but also tries to explore the meaning behind each phenomenon (Sukidin, 2002).

As a research methodology, there are several criticisms taken of the phenomenon. A criticism of phenomenology is that because it does not proceed from an experimental basis (for example, it lacks hypotheses, variables, and replication), it cannot be considered scientific despite phenomenology's claim to objectivity. Additionally, another concern is that because phenomenology is rooted in lived experience, and because data is usually obtained through interviews, interview participants will always be limited due to the unusual amount of time required to analyse the data. Because of this, another criticism is that the results of the research can hardly be considered sacred (Frey, 2018).

The note according to the author is that the phenomenological approach is used in interpreting reality

and a phenomenon. However, in determining its reliability and validity, research using a phenomenological approach is a challenge in itself and its subjectivity is often questioned. However, the phenomenological approach as a research method can describe a phenomenon as it is and tends not to manipulate data, and despite its shortcomings, according to the author, this approach has many views, making it easier to present more complete data.

The second opinion is that the phenomenological approach can reveal science or reality with truly objective truth that needs to be considered. Considered in terms of a researcher's actions in collecting data that could be biased. Biases caused by researchers can influence research, because they are influenced by feelings of empathy so that they become less objective or experience misunderstandings in capturing the meaning conveyed so that in the end they can be trapped in the researcher's own imagination and meaning.

The next opinion according to the author is that the aim of the phenomenological approach is to obtain purely objective knowledge without any influence from various previous points of view such as views from religion, custom, even from science, which is absurd and seems to tend to be unclear. Because phenomenology itself recognizes that the knowledge obtained is not value free but is actually value bound. Husserl developed his phenomenology as a method of philosophical analysis free from any a priori metaphysical commitments – although, as we will see later, this method he created later became something more than just a method. The general aim of this method, as with Husserl's initial concept, is to show and explain the internal structure of what he called “the experience of meaning”. Husserl was particularly interested in logic and wanted to clarify basic logical concepts and categories.

Husserl's Phenomenology



Subject Transcendental



First person point of view

Apart from the review outlined above, the phenomenological approach also has the advantage that the phenomenological approach views the object of study as a complete circle and is not separated from other objects. As Husserl stated in the previous explanation, consciousness is awareness of something and therefore consciousness has two aspects that coexist, namely the conscious process (process of being conscious=cogito) and the object of consciousness itself (cogitatum). So the reality of a phenomenon cannot be separated from the individual's own awareness.

Husserl believed that phenomena exist in a consciousness or the consciousness of a person to whom the phenomenon appears in its original form. Husserl stated that every phenomenon always consists of subjective activity and an object as its focus. Subjective activity always leads to an object. Subjective activities interpret, provide identity, and form meaning from objects. Therefore, subjective activity and the object as focus cannot be separated, they are always intertwined. Thus, to be able to understand the object, the individual must return to the subject. So, phenomena can only be seen through the people who experience the phenomenon (Michael Crotty, 1996) (Spiegelberg, 1971).

Spiegelberg also explained that there are six basic elements of the phenomenological approach that are commonly used when studying a phenomenon. These elements include: examining phenomena, examining the essence and patterns of relationships between essences of a phenomenon, examining patterns of manifestation of a phenomenon, exploring the structure of phenomena in human consciousness, bracketing, and interpreting the implicit meaning of a phenomenon (Spiegelberg, 1971).

Husserl's thesis on phenomenology has been criticized by many for being too philosophical, conceptual and difficult to decipher. Moreover, the notion that the ultimate human experience can be examined by setting aside pre-conceived knowledge has been dismissed as simplistic and unattainable. Furthermore, pure experience advocated by Husserl is elusive and inaccessible because experience is usually witnessed after the event has already happened (Tindall, 2009).

#### 4. Conclusion

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the phenomenological approach is a method of analysis and also a philosophical school that seeks to understand reality as it is in purity. Apart from the

various advantages and disadvantages previously described, the phenomenological approach has provided a valuable contribution to the world of science. Apart from that, this approach also overcomes the scientific methodology crisis by returning the role of the sub-subject which has been sidelined by the positivistic-scientific paradigm (Sukidin, 2002).

Husserl's phenomenology emphasizes that to understand a phenomenon one must examine the phenomenon as it is. Therefore, one must temporarily store or isolate the assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge one already has about the phenomenon. Only through this process is one able to achieve a genuine understanding of phenomena. Furthermore, Husserl's phenomenology believes that phenomena only exist in human consciousness to whom these phenomena appear. So to understand a phenomenon someone must observe the phenomenon through the person who experiences it

Phenomenology tries to approach the object of its study critically and precisely without prejudice and providing justification by any previous concepts. Therefore, by phenomenologists, the phenomenological approach is seen as a rigorous science. This is also in line with the principles of science, stated by J.B. Connant in (Muslih, 2004), namely: "The scientific way of thinking requires the habit of facing reality quite unprejudiced by and any earlier conceptions. Accurate observation and dependence upon experiments are guiding principles."

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