

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY: A PERSPECTIVE OF STUDYING IDENTITY FORMATION OF ADOLESCENT SUFFERING FROM CANCER AND CHRONIC PAIN

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Abstract

Throughout the history of psychology tension has existed between qualitative and quantitative research methods. The deepest roots of this tension are found in epistemology and on ontology of the research. This paper aims to prove that on ontological position identity research should be based on the relativist one, emphasizing the diversity of interpretation. Based on philosophy of science and on epistemology identity research should be based on empiricist position, which emphasizes that we can arrive at the true knowledge based only on human experience. Identity research should be based on phenomenological perspective to understand better how adolescent suffering from cancer and chronic pain experience the processes involved in self-construction and self-discovery. Cancer and pain are conditions that influence on angle of perception of the “true self” and phenomenological methodology is the best approach of discovering the process of identity formation of adolescents in this conditions. Through this article the steps of collecting data, analyzing and writing conclusions will be explained based on phenomenological approach.

Keywords: *phenomenological methodology, research, identity formation*

1. Ontology of identity research of adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain

Throughout the history of social science tension has existed between qualitative and quantitative research methods. This tension is based on how to make questions and justify scientifically their answers. Even more, this tension is explained from the way these methods reach the goal of discovering the truth. The deepest roots of this tension are found in epistemology which is known by scientist as theory of knowledge (Audi, 2011) and on ontology which is concerned with the nature of the world (Stab & Studer, 2009).

On ontological position identity research should be based on the relativist one, emphasizing the diversity of interpretation. The Neo-Eriksionian perspective focuses on individual identity and individual processes of identity development (Leary and Tagney, 2003). This position assumes identity as independent from structures and agency. The research based on scientific methodology cannot find cause-effect relationship between agency and identity. Based on scientific research we still are unclear what cause identity formation and what efforts can be

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done in order to maximize identity synthesis. Kroger (2000) recommends that identity research in new millennium should be based on individual interpretation of the contexts.

Based on this approach identity research should be concerned with the meaning and how people make sense with the world they live in (Stab & Studer, 2009). Psychologists who study identity during adolescence, based on relativist ontology, should focus on personal goals, values and beliefs (Kroger, 1996). Personal goals, values and beliefs are not objective and singular but subjective and multiple. Identity represents a coherent picture that one shows both to oneself and to the outside world (Schwartz, 2009).

Based on realist ontology, Marcia constructed uniqueness four ego-identity statuses. The basic assumption is that every adolescent can be classified into one, and only one, of these four categories (Rogow, Marcia, & Slugoski, 1983). This may be a useful typology but an inadequate reflection of reality (Bourne, 1978). As stated before, identity research should be based on relativist ontology. This approach assumes that individuals can experience the same 'objective' conditions (e.g. a particular disease process or a social event) in very different ways. We believe that adolescent experience is mediated by the thoughts and beliefs, expectations and judgments that the individual brings to it.

2. Epistemology of identity research of adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain

Epistemology involves thinking for the nature of knowledge, its scope and the validity and reliability of what we can know (Bernecker & Pritchard 2011). Based on philosophy of science epistemological positions are positivism, empiricism, hypothetico-deductivism and social-constructivism (Bernecker & Pritchard 2011). Hypothetico-deductivism is the mainstream of quantitative research methods and experimental designs. Popper proposed that instead of induction and verification, scientific research should rely on deduction and falsification (Willing, 2008). The best theory is the one that survives the fires of logical and empirical testing" (Poper, 1976). The logical consistency of theories is tested through the lens of the critical eye of the scientific community (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister.B, Zechmeister.S, 2011). However, this approach is criticized for not offering space for new theory development and rejecting the scientists from research because of not being familiar with such theories.

Thomas Kuhn (1996) writes "science do not progress continuously", as Popper suggests, but through scientific revolutions. In psychology we have the progression of psychoanalysis, behaviorism and humanism which are developed through scientific revolutions and not through falsification and deduction as Popper thought.

Based on hypothetico-deductivism we cannot deduct the identity formation of adolescent who suffer from cancer and chronic pain from the theory which is created based on normal adolescents. Suffering from cancer and pain leads to an existential insecurity which is expressed in irrational forms of coping that are of high subjective evidence for the adolescent

themselves, and which are influenced by the adolescent' life stories (Koenigsmann, Koehler, Franke, & Frommer, 2006). On the other hand identity research should not be based on social-constructivism because, based on ontological relativism stated above, we are focused on constructing the self, not the social reality.

On epistemological positions identity research should be based on empiricist position which emphasizes that we can arrive at the knowledge based in experience. We can arrive at the truth through systematic collection of naturalistic data and classification of these observations (Willing, 2008). John Stuart Mill held that there are only empirical truths and that our knowledge of them is based on experience, for instance on perception. This approach has the roots on the assumption that people's explanations tell us something about their private thoughts and feelings, and that these in turn are implicated in people's experiences. Adolescent's experience of true self may be the subjective experience of self-discovery and then accompanying feelings of authenticity (Vignoles et al, 2010). From the empiricist position all the knowledge for identity research must be grounded on data.

Ontology and epistemology prescribe our methodology of research. We have arrived on the conclusion that identity research should be based on relativist ontology and empiricist epistemology. Based on this approach identity research should study personal goals, values and beliefs and this must be done through collection of naturalistic, systematic data and scientific classification of these observations.

3. The necessity of phenomenological methodology on identity research of adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain

Schwartz (2010) recommends that identity research should be based on qualitative methodologies to understand better how people experience the processes involved in self-construction and self-discovery. Quantitative methodologies through experiments and surveys cannot discover whether the "true self" that adolescents are experiencing existed prior to its discovery or whether in reality they are experiencing a sense of authenticity that they have constructed (Schwartz 2010).

During recent years, qualitative research on patients has grown in the fields of oncology (Loprinzi, 2003), psychology (Rennie, Watson, & Monteiro, 2002), psychotherapy research (Frommer & Rennie, 2006) as well as in general medicine (Greenhalg & Hurwitz, 1998). The qualitative approach which is based on relativist ontology and empiricist epistemology is the phenomenological methodology.

Based on Husserl philosophy, phenomenology is concerned with the world as it is experienced by human beings within particular contexts and at particular times (Willing, 2008). The presence of an object as a perceptual phenomenon varies depending on the perceiver's location and context, angle of perception and, importantly, the perceiver's mental orientation (Willing, 2008). Based on this approach identity formation depends on adolescent condition; suffering from cancer and pain is not the same condition as not suffering from

them. Cancer and pain are conditions that influence on angle of perception of the “true self” and phenomenological methodology is the best approach of discovering the identity formation of adolescents in this conditions.

Empirical phenomenological research in psychology was pioneered and applied extensively at Duquesne University in the USA for studying many psychological phenomena such as anger, being victimized, learning, etc. (Giorgi et al. 1975). Phenomenological methodology requires extraction from known theories and trying to find the essence of the phenomena grounded in collected data. The phenomenological methodology will contribute to better understanding of identity formation in adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain. This fundamental understanding can be arrived when individuals focus on their personal experience (McLeod, 2001). Based on this approach the truth, of identity formation, have to be grounded in data and this data must be gained from self-reflections.

4. Ethics of identity research of adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain

Based on Elmes (1995) the process of research in phenomenological approach should include informed consent, nonexistence of deception, the right to withdraw, psychological debriefing and maintaining of confidentiality. All adolescent who suffer from cancer and chronic pain should be fully informed about the research and give their informed consent to participate for data collection. Adolescents should be protected from deception and none of participants should experience harm or loss during research process.

Even more, while studying identity formation of adolescent suffering from cancer and chronic pain the researcher have to think how to turn in a profit the research process for all the participants. Based on ethic, all the adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain must have the right to withdraw whenever they want from research. The researcher should maintain complete confidentiality for all the data collection from adolescents who took part in research. In the end of process the adolescents should have full access to the results and publication of the study. Other qualitative researchers go beyond this basic principle of ethics because human interaction in phenomenological methodology affects both the researcher and participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2008).

5. Participants and the role of the researcher

The current study will investigate identity formation of adolescent suffering from cancer and chronic pain. Participants will be adolescent who suffer from cancer and chronic pain and who take health care in “Mother Teresa” University Hospital. For the purpose of this study, we will chose 20 adolescent with an age range from 17 to 19 years old. Ten adolescent would be diagnosed with cancer and 10 with chronic pain (suffering from more than 6 months from pain even they have taken medical treatment). The author of the study will collect all the data from the participants and later on will analyzing the results and conceptualize the findings. The researcher is implicated in the process and is a central figure because he who will construct the findings. The aim of phenomenological methodology is to understand better the

participant's psychological world; researchers accept that such understanding can only be gained through the researcher's engagement with and interpretation of the participant's account.

6. The phenomenological approach of collecting records on identity research of adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain

Based on Duquesne school, the first step of phenomenological methodology is collection of verbal and written protocols for describing the experience of identity formation of adolescent suffering from cancer and chronic pain. For arriving at the essence of identity formation would be valid to use these methods of data collection.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions will allow the respondent to provide as much information as they want. Identity Status Interview (Marcia & Archer, 1993) is a very useful instrument for conducting in-depth psychological studies of small samples. Adolescent who suffer from cancer and chronic pain represent a small number of cases from adolescent population. The interview is designed to reveal the presence or absence of a developmental process: the history of how individuals, through the course of their lives, came to their present identity resolutions. The researcher based on Identity Status Interview will ask participants in depth how they came to their present commitments or lack of commitments ; what their past influences had been; as well as how and why they had changed from whom they had been in childhood (Kroger & Marcia, 2010).

Autobiographical essay where participants were asked to write about themselves in the past, the present, and as they imagine themselves in the future. The participants will be asked to write a personal statement that describes who they are. In other words, adolescents would be asked to "Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it." The adolescents will be instructed for writing the autobiographical essay; taking care for the felt emotions while writing and for the emotion they have felt during developmental phases which are part of the essay. The adolescents will have one month for writing the autobiographical essay.

Tape- recorders diary are a very useful method for collecting qualitative psychological data. Adolescent will be instructed that each day for the next three months to record the answers of the questions: Who I am? What is the essence of me? They will be instructed to record whatever comes in their mind when they make these questions and also record all the information they say to themselves.

7. ²The steps of analyzing the phenomenological records on identity research of adolescents suffering from cancer and chronic pain

The next step of phenomenological methodology is transcription of adolescent interviews, essays and diaries. This includes the literal statements and as much as possible noting

² This analysis is bases on Duquesne School of Empirical Phenomenology ((McLeod, 2001) and on Interpretative Phenomenology (Willing, 2008)

significant non-verbal and para-linguistic communications. The transcription will be made by single cases.

After the transcription, it is recommended to read the written records carefully to get a sense of the whole. Here we have a problem that parts can only be understood from an understanding of the whole, but that the whole can only be understood from an understanding of the parts' (Schmidt 2006). From this point of view understanding requires a spherical movement from assumption to interpretation and back again (Willing, 2008).

The work of the researcher is reading and rereading of the texts one by one. At this stage of analysis, the researcher produces wide-ranging and unfocused notes that reflect the initial thoughts and observations he or she may wish to record in response to the text. The fourth step is extracting significant statements from the records. For example, the significant statement that adolescents have experienced for identity formation. The fifth step is eliminating irrelevant repetition for the phenomenon.

The sixth stage of analysis requires the researcher to identify and label themes that characterize each section of the text. Amadeo Giorgi, one of the key figures of the Duquesne School of Empirical Phenomenology, recommends that researchers have to be very careful during thematic analysis. During this stage the researcher is free to use identity formation and development terminology.

Thematic analysis is not really phenomenological: they confuse the difference between the constituents of a structure. The difference is, the constituents are interrelated—Husserl makes a distinction among parts between what he calls “pieces” and “moments.” A “piece” is a part that can be independent of the whole: I can break a branch off a tree; the branch becomes a piece. But then there are parts that you cannot separate, and he calls them “moments,” so that the color green of a leaf is a moment—I can't take green out of the leaf, OK? It belongs to it. So a constituent is a moment of a structure, it is quite different, it is interdependent with all of the other moments, it can't stand alone like a piece.

(Giorgi, 2011 Duquesne School of Empirical Phenomenology)

After thematic analysis the researcher lists the themes identified in the previous stage and thinks about them in relation to one another. Some of the themes will form natural collections of concepts that share meanings or references, whereas others will be characterized by hierarchical relationships with one another. Clusters of themes need to be given labels that capture their essence. Here the researcher will understand better the participant's psychological world. He will go to the truth only through engagement with and interpretation of the participant's account.

The next step of analysis is the production of a summary table of the structured themes, together with quotations that illustrate each theme. The summary table should only include those themes that capture something about the quality of the participant's experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

The last and most important stage, of phenomenological analysis is integrating the meanings from single cases to an exhaustive description of the identity formation phenomenon. Integrative themes need to be grounded in the data just as much as lower-level conceptual themes are.

8. Writing conclusions

After phenomenological analysis of the record the researcher has to write the conclusions. Based on phenomenological approach there are two ways for writing the findings of the study. The first way is a more descriptive with empathy that aims to allow the researcher to enter the participant's world. While the second way critically interrogates the participant's explanation in order to gain further insight into its nature, meaning and origin. This is more like the hermeneutic approach. The second level of interpretation, therefore, takes the researcher beyond the participant's own words and understanding and is not very scientific and grounded in data.

9. Conclusions

Phenomenological methodology represents a way of knowing that has always been a crucial part of humanity. The goals of this method are bracketing-off assumption, careful and exhaustive description and searching for the essence of phenomenon. Phenomenological analysis works with language and with the texts. Based on Lacanian Psychoanalysis, language is the essence of the self and the only "tool" where we can find the truth. Based on this approach phenomenological methodology is one of the most useful approaches for studying identity formation.

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