



On Evidence and Argument in Phenomenological Research

by Russell Walsh

Abstract

Set against a background of calls for evidence-based practice, this paper explores the role of evidence and argument in phenomenological research. Drawing on Smith's (1998) analysis of original argument, the author considers how evidence can be discerned, understood, and communicated, and the resulting kinds and contexts of knowledge that may be constituted in the practice of phenomenological research. Linking Churchill's (2012) discussion of researcher perspectivity with Smith's analysis of original argument, contrasts are drawn between rhetorical, demonstrative, and dialectical approaches to argument, with proposed parallels to first-person, second-person, and third-person perspectives explored. Implications for argument-based phenomenological research are discussed.

What counts as evidence in phenomenological research? Within phenomenology as it is currently practised there are many answers to this fundamental question. If we consider the myriad ways in which evidence can be obtained, examined and understood, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the complexity of this question. If we then add the rhetorical role of evidence in the presentation and justification of research findings, the relevance of this question for the practice of phenomenology becomes clear. Exploring the evidence-based nature of phenomenological research therefore requires thoughtful explication of the multiple meanings of evidence and argument. This is my goal for the paragraphs that follow.

It is first necessary to explain what I mean by evidence. To begin, I reflect on two distinct meanings of the term. On the one hand, evidence is something one discovers or gathers amidst the process of answering a particular set of questions. On the other hand, evidence is something one presents in order to advance an argument. Phenomenological research consists of both kinds of evidence, and each is shaped by the epistemology and subsequent methodology

employed by the researcher. To characterize phenomenology as evidence-based is therefore accurate but merely the start of a conversation. The conversation that should follow (and this is true with regard to any form of research) concerns the way in which evidence is conceptualized and how it is used in the service of answering a research question.

When a researcher poses a question and applies a method to addressing that question, he or she does so based on assumptions regarding the nature and limits of knowledge; in other words, epistemology. These assumptions dictate both what counts as evidence and how it may be accessed and analyzed. In phenomenology, the divergent viewpoints that Sass (1989) has called humanism and hermeneutics are particularly relevant to epistemology. As I have discussed elsewhere (Walsh & Koelsch, 2012), a key point of contrast is the conceptualization of the subject as either fundamentally self-transparent or self-obscure. From the humanistic perspective, experience is consciousness and is made accessible through procedural and practical effort. In contrast, from the hermeneutic viewpoint, experience is understood as always involving an implicit context

largely outside of the subject's conscious awareness. These distinct positions have given rise to different forms of phenomenological research.

The roots of this distinction can of course be traced to points of contrast between Husserl and Heidegger. However, it must also be acknowledged that each of these thinkers presented complex and dynamic lines of thought, and that any simple characterization of differences entails oversimplification. Keeping this in mind, it is still possible to say that Husserlian phenomenology is grounded in the conscious reflection of participants, while Heideggerian phenomenology calls for interpretation of the engaged, unreflective ready-to-hand activity of participants. Hence, what counts as evidence of lived experience can vary considerably across these perspectives.

It should be noted that there has been considerable intertwining of these perspectives throughout the developmental history of phenomenological research. Indeed, it is possible to see elements of each perspective in the origins of the empirical phenomenological method. Although Giorgi (1970) situated his method in Husserl's phenomenology, the positional shift this method entailed introduced what can be called an interpretive move. Specifically, whereas Husserl's philosophical method calls for a (re)turn to the immediate experience of the perceiver (i.e. the subject who is also the object of reflection) Giorgi's application of Husserl's method involves a researcher explicating the implicit features of participants' reflective experiential accounts. It was this positional shift that led Colaizzi (1973) to distinguish between Fundamental Description (based on the participants' reflective account) and Fundamental Structure (requiring the researcher's reflective interpretation of the participants' reflective accounts) in phenomenological research. From its inception, empirical phenomenological research has thus included features of both Husserlian and Heideggerian (or, in Sass's (1989) terminology, humanistic and hermeneutic) thought.

Methodologically, the phenomenological epoché and the hermeneutic circle are counterpoints that follow from the Husserlian and Heideggerian positions (with the caveat that these positions were in fact dynamic). The epoché is accomplished via bracketing of presuppositions in order to freshly experience the phenomenon of interest. However, as noted above, the character or position of bracketing changed with the adaptation of philosophical phenomenology to empirical psychological research. In empirical phenomenology, the task of bracketing shifts from experiencing subject to observing subject (which in philosophical phenomenology are one and the same). Hence, it is the researcher's conscious apprehension

of the participant's reflection of experience that is the object of the epoché, rather than the participant's experience.

In both philosophical and empirical Husserlian phenomenology bracketing is directed at two distinct kinds of presuppositions: the natural attitude and abstract conceptualization. The natural attitude may pose a greater obstacle for the experiencing subject, while abstract conceptualization carries the greater risk for the researcher as observing subject. Moreover, the nature of bracketing with regard to each kind of presupposition is different. Setting aside the natural attitude requires a move of detachment, such that the things themselves can be apprehended beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions in which everyday experience is embedded. In contrast, with regard to abstract conceptualization, the epoché entails a move toward the practical and concrete so that understanding is grounded in the things themselves. This is one reason why Giorgi (1970) emphasized so strongly the importance of description over interpretation. When adopting a Husserlian approach to an experience subjectively once removed, the researcher is at a greater risk of imposing an abstract conceptualization in the form of interpretation. As a methodological corrective to this potential, anchoring the researcher's analysis in the concrete particulars of the participant's reflective account seems both rigorous and well considered.

The hermeneutic circle, stemming from Heideggerian phenomenology, begins with the assumption that researcher bias makes understanding possible. At the same time, there is acknowledgement that misunderstanding also follows from bias. The researcher therefore strives to discern between the two by inviting confirmation and contradiction via ongoing engagement with the phenomenon in question. The hermeneutic circle describes the process of projecting oneself into a phenomenon in order to understand it, initially on the basis of one's presuppositions and then listening for the friction between those presuppositions and contradictory feedback from the object of inquiry. This feedback allows for researchers to catch a glimpse of their biases as well discover as novel aspects of that which they seek to understand.

Despite methodological differences, both Husserlian and Heideggerian approaches adopt similar stances with respect to evidence gathering in the process of answering a research question. Although this approach can be called empirical in the sense that it seeks to learn from experience – both the experience of the participant and the researcher's experience of that experience - I think a better term would be argumentative, if that word is used in its original sense.

According to Smith (1998), original argument had several defining features. First, it was collaborative and practically oriented. In other words, an argument was a conversation directed toward the goal of solving a problem or answering a question. A second feature of original argument was that it involved listening to evidence that challenged or complicated one's position, and allowing the understanding of the problem to evolve as a result of this evidence. Another feature of original argument identified by Smith is its balanced composition of logos, ethos, and pathos. Hence, while logical reasoning played an important role in argumentation the trustworthiness and emotional engagement of an argument were also crucial features. This stands in contrast to the more contemporary sense of argument in which logical reasoning is considered paramount. Analytical philosophy and the natural scientific method (as well as some manifestations of phenomenological research) both consider logical or methodical precision and the demonstration that one's research is done "cleanly and correctly" (Bazerman, 1988, p. 272) as the central criteria for validity.

My characterization of phenomenology as argumentative in the original sense is intended to underscore its human and historical sensibility. When Husserl (1970) advocates a return to the things themselves and Gadamer (1989) argues against methodical precision in favor of dialogue, both are promoting a way of doing research, or of answering a question or solving a problem, that is based in the way humans originally understand. In this sense, the natural attitude against which Husserl cautions is not natural at all, at least not in the sense of originality. Instead, it is an attitude that has been layered upon our original sensibility, privileging objectivity and rationality to the exclusion of relationality and empathic engagement.

Although I have suggested that phenomenology is grounded in original argument, we must also acknowledge that there are many forms of practice called phenomenological. As highlighted by both Giorgi (2008) and Walsh and Koelsch (2012), the extent of methodological and epistemological variation in current phenomenological research makes it difficult to ascertain even basic common features. It is therefore unsurprising that argument is taken up in many different ways. These different ways can be best appreciated by elaborating Smith's (1998) analysis of argumentative forms or styles.

Smith (1998) explores both the character of original argument and its shift in form over time. The contemporary understanding of argument is a result of its move away from an engaged, collaborative context in favor of disengaged debate. In this new understanding, advancing a position becomes the

central concern. From this disengaged stance one can pursue demonstration, which seeks to strengthen one's claims and insulate them against criticism, or pursue dialectic, which identifies counterpoints with respect to the matter at hand in order to synthesize from those counterpoints a coherent position. The latter of these more closely approximates the spirit of original argument, but it shares with demonstration a detached approach to understanding and an emphasis on logos (logic) as a central criterion for validity.

In order to apply Smith's (1998) analysis to the current practice of phenomenological research, we must consider the two relational contexts in which all research occurs. The first of these contexts is the conversational domain in which the researcher and his or her participants are embedded. The manner in which a researcher engages with participants determines the form of argument that follows. Churchill's (2012) elaboration of first, second, and third person perspectives is particularly relevant in this regard. The second relational context is that which unfolds between the researcher as author and his or her audience. In this context, the researcher shifts from exploring evidence with participants to presenting evidence to an audience of scholars and fellow researchers.

It is then necessary to examine the forms that argument can take in the first domain of conversation between researcher and participant. Churchill (2012), drawing from a host of other phenomenological scholars, distinguishes between first person, third person, and the ideal of second person perspectives in phenomenological research. The first person perspective is concerned with imagining the other's standpoint from one's own vantage point, while the third person perspective is oriented toward observing the other's behaviour without concern for his or her subjective experience. In contrast to these two perspectives, the second person perspective "is a special mode of access to the other that occurs *within* the first person plural: in *experiencing the other within the we*" (Churchill, p. 2, emphasis in original). In relation to Smith's (1998) analysis, this second person perspective seems characteristic of original argument.

Although for both Churchill (2012) and Smith (1998) this collaborative relational engagement is essential to phenomenological understanding, it is important to acknowledge that not all qualitative research – even that framed as phenomenological – is pursued along these lines. Indeed, the first person and third person perspectives, which we could align with the dialectical and demonstrative forms of argument respectively, seem quite common in practice. When bracketing is employed to expurgate bias and access participants' experience directly, it is a dialectical

process that entails imagining the counterpoint of another's experience. Similarly, amidst the hermeneutical process of oscillating between one's pre-understandings and misunderstandings one may also engage in a dialectical process. The dialectical nature of these approaches follows from the first person position of the researcher. When the epoché or the hermeneutic circle fit Churchill's designation of the first person perspective, they are practiced as imaginative rather than collaborative activities. Since imaginative understanding is refined intellectually rather than relationally, it must rely on criteria such as logical coherence and procedural rigour for refinement and justification.

The demonstrative approach to argument, with a third person perspective, is also apparent in some forms of hermeneutic phenomenological research. When detached interpretive reading supplants relational engagement, interpretive analysis becomes a matter of demonstration, compiling observational evidence to support the observer's position. In this case, the hermeneutic circle becomes a process of continuous strengthening of one's own argument rather than engaging in dialogue. When divorced from true dialogue this refinement must rely on the criteria of logical coherence and procedural rigour for justification.

The forms of argument and perspective explored above can also be considered in relation to Heidegger's (1962) characterization of modes of engagement. The distinctions between ready-to-hand, present-at-hand, and unready-to-hand ways of being (and knowing) can both inform and complicate our concern for evidence and argument in research. If the ready-to-hand mode denotes engaged activity, then both original argument and the second person perspective are relevant in this regard. In both cases, we could say that understanding is made possible to the degree that participants allow themselves to become lost in conversation. However, the phrase lost in conversation reminds us that the ready-to-hand mode is predominantly unreflective, and hence seemingly contradictory to the goal of novel understanding. This highlights the appeal of dialectic and demonstration, which strive to step out of the potentially unreflective standpoint of engaged activity in order to gain and affirm a new (detached) perspective. What is sacrificed in these rhetorical moves is collaborative understanding, which perhaps need not be so readily abandoned. Alternatively, we might consider the unready-to-hand mode of engagement, whereby new understanding is made possible because something that is taken for granted breaks down or becomes problematic.

Questions can then be asked regarding whether original argument and the second person perspective

are indicative of the unready-to-hand mode of engagement and, if this is indeed the case, what this tells us about evidence and argument. In terms of the first question, it is important to remember that one of the defining features of original argument was its orientation toward solving a problem. Moreover, original argument entailed listening for evidence that complicated or problematized one's initial (unreflective) understanding. Hence, it is possible to say that the second person perspective in phenomenology affirms the problem of unreflective understanding and in so doing allows for reflective understanding. This form of understanding is not made reflective through detachment but rather through the collaborative engagement that makes understanding a problem. In other words, understanding of a certain sort is not at all difficult from a detached perspective because it only entails building an argument that is logically coherent. It becomes problematic only when we feel the friction of our initial understanding brushed up against the disconfirming evidence of our conversational partner. Recognizing this problem facilitates reflective understanding of what was previously lived out unreflectively.

Returning to the question of evidence and original argument it is therefore possible to say that evidence emerges in the context of collaborative conversation oriented toward the goal of solving a problem. This collaborative conversation enables participants to render problematic, and thus reflect on, the taken-for-granted features of their initial understandings and in so doing invite new understandings. It is also possible to say that evidence discovered in this way is different from evidence that is gathered in the service of advancing a position or making a case. The latter course of action involves corroboration more than discovery, thus strengthening the case for what the researcher already knows to be true. In phenomenological research, the former approach increases the likelihood of complicating the object of study, whereas the latter approach makes simplification more likely.

The advantage of dialectical and demonstrative approaches is that they tend to move progressively toward greater clarity and precision. By beginning from and remaining in the first or third person perspectives, dialectic and demonstration bring order to a discrete set of evidence by increasingly refining the evidence in the set. On the other hand, in conversation evidence emerges and changes such that, at least initially, clarity and precision decrease over time. As a consequence, the researcher engaged in original argument is likely to incur confusion as the object of study becomes more complex rather than simplified.

A practical implication of the distinctions drawn thus far pertains to the common practice in phenomenological research of obtaining written protocols or accounts of their experience from participants. While this practice generates a text that fixes what is said, and therefore makes it more accessible to analysis (Ricoeur, 1973), in terms of our current concerns it seems to turn away from the prospect of original argument. Authoring a written protocol evokes a present-at-hand detachment from lived experience and the evidence with which a researcher is presented may therefore be both simpler than and once removed from engaged activity. Attempts to understand this experiential account will be further simplified by the researcher's detachment (engaging in textual analysis rather than conversation) and first person perspective (relying on imagination rather than dialogue to discern participants' lived experience). The results that follow from these procedures are more readily accessible to thematic description, but potentially are at some distance from the lived experience that was the original object of interest.

An alternative methodological practice that is more in line with original argument entails entering the "playground of language" (Walsh, 2004, p. 117) and "experiencing the other within the we" (Churchill, 2012, p. 2) through collaborative conversation with participants. Heeding Gadamer's (1989) call to be concerned less with methodical rigour and more with collaborative understanding, this approach aims to generate dialogue between researcher and participants. Such dialogue, which is by necessity mutually reflexive, has as its goal novel understanding for all involved. It also provides for thematic analysis evidence that can explicate the researcher's role in co-constituting the research results.

To summarize the results of our query thus far, we can say that phenomenological research, to the extent that it is rooted in original argument, is collaborative, mutually reflexive, and oriented toward discovery. This approach to discovery cultivates an unready-to-hand mode of engagement that affirms the problematic, intertwined nature of understanding and misunderstanding and via this affirmation strives to catch glimpses of the implicit features of lived experience – including the lived experience of telling and listening to storied accounts of experience. In contrast, it is also possible to say that phenomenological research rooted in contemporary rather than original argument employs methodological detachment in order to interpret or imagine the lived experience of an other, and that understanding from these perspectives is refined through the principle criterion of logical coherence.

Although the paper thus far has discussed evidence and argument in the methodological conduct of phenomenological research, it must be noted that the original argument and its alternatives again emerge at the point of presenting findings to an audience. While to some degree the manner of presentation is shaped by disciplinary norms, within these established structures there is also variability regarding how and to whom arguments are made. The whom is constituted, at least in part, by the how. In other words, the manner of engagement undertaken by the author/researcher solicits a particular kind of audience. An approach grounded in original argument invites the reader or listener into the complexity of the phenomenon, revealing both the ambiguity of findings as well as the position from which they were apprehended (via reflexive self-disclosure). This constitutes the audience as participants in a conversation rather than as witnesses to the demonstration of facts. In contrast, research presented via contemporary argument presents conclusions in a manner designed to prove a point and to deflect potential criticism (rather than to invite dialogue). This latter approach is best demonstrated by the common practice of identifying potential shortcomings of one's research in order to inform future studies. This often takes the form of rote disclaimers regarding the size or unique features of the sample of participants, rather than disclosing the problems discovered during the course of the study.

In light of the preceding discussion regarding the second person perspective and the unready-to-hand mode of engagement, the way in which original argument might shape the process of presenting research can be considered. First, as mentioned above, a presentation that invites the audience to collaboratively consider the research question and results would seem consonant with original argument. This would entail thorough disclosure of the researcher's presuppositions, doubts and regrets, and complicating questions that emerged over the course of the study. Rather than insulating the researcher's conclusions from scrutiny, this style of presentation would affirm that acknowledging the complicated and problematic nature of a study invites (via an unready-to-hand mode of engagement) discovery and novel understanding. It would also recognize the presentation of results as a turn that forms part of a conversation instead of being the final word.

A second way in which original argument could inform the practices of presentation and publication would be by underscoring the complementary criteria of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. Phenomenological research seems ideally suited to this balance of criteria as the person of the researcher and the emotional valence of the phenomenon, as well as the logical coherence, are

explicitly endorsed as central to understanding. The breadth of these criteria, which encompass the relational aspects of research, can make for a truly human science. As highlighted by Todres and Galvin (2005), breadth invites depth as well because it moves beyond a coherent yet simple account to one that is complex and nuanced. This is true not just of the lived experience that is the object of phenomenological research, but also of the intersubjective practice of sharing research findings with others.

The past decade has seen growth in the variety of presentational formats for qualitative research. However, it must be noted that diversity of presentational style does not ensure breadth with respect to the criteria of original argument. Without adequate disclosure of the context of the research, which includes the researcher's role in and perspective on the phenomenon studied, the uncertainties and complexities revealed over the course of the research (i.e., the intertwining of understanding and misunderstanding) and the logic of the researcher's question and conclusions, a novel presentational format can remain as detached and inaccessible as the most abstract theoretical or methodical argument. One example in this regard is performative social science. The promise of performative presentation is its potential to break free from a single-minded focus on rhetorical precision as the criterion for validity. However, the risk is a swing toward dramatic presentations that strive for impact to the exclusion of engaged, reflective dialogue. By grounding novel presentational practices, whether performative or otherwise, in original argument, phenomenological researchers can explore lived relational experience within the context of lived relational experience.

This discussion of evidence and argument in

phenomenological research takes place amidst calls for evidence-based practice in medicine, nursing, psychotherapy, and pedagogy. These calls have frequently been answered with dictates for a specific type of research rather than with discussion of the manner in which any type of research is conducted rhetorically. This exploration of different forms of argument, with original argument as a comparative standard, suggests that evidence-based research can be either discovery oriented or demonstrative in practice and presentation, with distinct implications for the professional world we co-constitute. Demonstrative research, phenomenological or otherwise, focuses on validating what is already presumed to be true. It does so in a methodical manner which is aimed at minimizing alternative interpretations. In contrast, argumentative research, in the original sense of the term, seeks dialogue with participants as well as with colleagues, inviting complexity and contradiction with respect to both the topic of research and the researcher's perspective and embracing the problematic and utterly relational nature of understanding.

To the extent that evidence-based research begins and ends with concern for concrete practices in interpersonal contexts, phenomenology seems ideally suited to the task. In recalling the features of original argument, we are reminded that research can be phenomenological in orientation toward both the practices that are the object of study and the practices of the research itself. Through affirming both aspects of phenomenological practice, it is possible to pursue evidence-based research that invites conversation rather than seeks the final word. In so doing, we can heed Von Eckartsberg's (1986) call to "make our approach as explicit as possible" (p. 98).

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