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The Phenomenological House: A Metaphoric Framework for Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Design and Analysis

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Abstract

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Keywords

descriptive phenomenology, Giorgian phenomenological psychological analysis, structural essence, qualitative research & education

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The Phenomenological House: A Metaphoric Framework for Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Design and Analysis

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Descriptive phenomenology investigates the essence of how phenomena are consciously experienced (Giorgi, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). Researchers wishing to conduct descriptive phenomenological studies may struggle to find answers to the complex questions that arise. Misunderstood concepts and practices may lead to philosophical conflict, ultimately threatening validity and rigor. This manuscript provides readers a metaphoric framework “the phenomenological house” to understand and analyze Giorgi’s phenomenological psychological conceptualization of essence as a universal structural description of how a phenomenon is lived. Ultimately, the phenomenological house provides a pathway for qualitative researchers to navigate descriptive phenomenology and contribute to its progression.

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Descriptive phenomenology focuses on the exploration of how phenomena are experienced as they arise into subjects’ consciousness. Unpeeling the layers of relationships, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to uncover an essential framework which describes “things as they are” (Giorgi, 2008, 2009, 2012; Husserl, 1913/1983; Vagle, 2018). Born from Husserlian philosophy, descriptive phenomenology has evolved into a research framework which stays true to its philosophical underpinnings while attending to the epistemological and ontological rigor required of empirical research (Giorgi, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012; Husserl, 1913/1983; Moustakas, 1994, Vagle, 2018). Descriptive phenomenology is not intended to create or validate theories, nor illustrate individual truths, but instead it describes the structural core of psychological processes necessary for the phenomenon under study to be consciously lived (Englander 2016, Giorgi, 2008, 2009, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Descriptive phenomenology has been used to examine the lived experience of tourism (Jackson et al., 2018), cultural identity silencing (Leigh-Osroosh & Hutchison, 2019), and cancer (Murdoch, 2010), as well as in nursing research (Flood, 2010). Over time it has evolved into a form of analysis which can stand up to the empirical research rigor of today (Giorgi, 2008, 2009, 2012; Vagle, 2018).

The purpose of this manuscript is to provide a tool for understanding and utilizing descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis (Giorgi, 2008, 2009, 2012). It is intended for researchers who wish to explore the underlying psychological essence of phenomena, and proposes a metaphorical framework, the phenomenological house, as a tool, to form a more practical understanding of descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis. Lastly, a case study example is presented which guides the reader through the phenomenological house framework.

Descriptive versus Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis

While descriptive phenomenology explores the *of-ness* of how phenomena are lived, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to describe the *in-ness* or how interactions within subject/object create phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology posits that there is no core essence and seeks to describe the subjective layers that are commonly experienced rather than the essential core structure of the experienced phenomenon. These layers are the subjective ontological elements that exist within the phenomenon. Elements are primarily subjective and independent of the phenomenon, often categorized into themes which contain subjective descriptions of how that theme exists within subject (participant) and object (phenomenon) creating a colorful collage of separate pieces which together form a unique mosaic of lifeworld experience versus a universal structural frame (Vagle, 2018). By contrast, descriptive phenomenology describes an essential epistemological core structure of interrelated building blocks, constituents, necessary for the phenomenon to be consciously experienced. Overall, descriptive phenomenology seeks to uncover the epistemological core of the phenomenon, which is necessary for it to exist, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to uncover the common interrelationships within the phenomenon which characterize its existence (Vagle, 2018).

While both descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology use subjective descriptions in their analysis, descriptive phenomenology works to separate the unique subject (both participant and researcher) from the phenomenon, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology works to interweave the unique subject within the phenomenon. Additionally, researchers engaging in descriptive phenomenology actively bracket out their bias throughout the research process whereas researchers using hermeneutic phenomenology approach the study with an interpretive lens, actively becoming part of the analysis (Giorgi, 2008, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). By strict standards Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis only requires one interview where the participant reconstructs their first experience of the phenomenon. In contrast, hermeneutic phenomenology can include various data collection techniques which address several layers of the subjective experience of the phenomenon i.e., interviews, observations, journaling, photovoice, etc. (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Ultimately, researchers need to critically examine their primary research question and develop a sound understanding of the primary tenets of the phenomenological method before conducting a study (Vagle, 2018).

Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Approach

Descriptive phenomenological psychological approach is an appropriate methodology when exploring the universal psychological experience of a *problem of life* (Giorgi, 2009, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Problem of life is the phenomenon being experienced which forms the primary research question, situated within a context that includes three main principles: *natural attitude*, *lifeworld*, and *modes of appearing* (Christensen et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2009, 2012; Vagle, 2018). Natural attitude is the knowledge and past experiences which informs the subjects' current approach (engagement) to the world. Lifeworld is the experienced reality created from this intentional relationship between natural attitude and engagement (Giorgi, 2009; Henriques, 2014; Vagle, 2018). Descriptive phenomenology is an examination into this *intentional relation* or *of-ness* of the subject towards the object which creates the conscious experience of phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). Intentional relations are "how people are connected meaningfully with things of the world" and what characterize the phenomenon (Vagle, 2018, p. 28). *Modes of appearing* is the process for which objects experienced in the lifeworld (reality) became conscious to the subject's awareness and what is used to form the resulting

structural description (descriptive essence; Giorgi, 2009). Together these principles describe the intention of the methodology and positionality of the researcher in the exploration of the underlying psychological experiences necessary for the phenomenon to consciously exist.

Intentionality and Epoche

Intentionality is an important component, or stance, when conducting phenomenological research regardless of which phenomenological approach is used (Vagle, 2018). Philosophically, intentionality is the understanding of “how we are meaningfully connected to the world” (Vagle, 2018, p. 28). In descriptive phenomenology intentionality becomes an exploration the essence of phenomenon, its universal structural core (Giorgi, 2009, 2012; Vagle, 2018). Contrary to hermeneutic phenomenology which incorporates researcher interpretation to describe subjective elements of the phenomenon, descriptive phenomenology utilizes a process called *imaginative variation* (phenomenological reduction). During this process the researchers, examine the phenomenon by strictly adhering to the *invivo* narrative while engaging in *epoche* (bracketing) to explore the psychological experience of intentional relation within the phenomenological context (Giorgi, 2008, 2009, 2012; Husserl, 1913/1983; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). *Epoche* is an active engagement in separating researcher bias from the relationships inherent in the interview and analysis process i.e., researcher-to-construct; researcher-to-participant; researcher-to-data, in order to uncover the eidetic (universal) structural description of the lived phenomenon. Researchers practicing *epoche* engage in a reflexive dance between their natural attitude (inherent bias) and the phenomenon under exploration (Butler, 2016; Vagle, 2018). The purpose of this reflexive dance is to uphold the lifeworld reality of the participant as it presents itself throughout the analysis process (Butler, 2016; Giorgi, 2008, 2009, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). Ultimately, the researcher embodies this phenomenological attitude throughout the study including initial design, phenomenological interview, and analysis to uncover the eidetic structural description of the phenomenon.

Phenomenological Interview

In-depth unstructured phenomenological interview is the primary source of data collection (Bevan, 2014; Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2018). Through in-depth phenomenological interviews the experiencer reconstructs the phenomenon. It is important to understand the difference between reconstructing and remembering of experience. Reconstruction asks the participant to describe the phenomenon as they lived it whereas memories ask the participant to describe already assigned meanings to past experiences. Unlike reconstructing experience, describing memories does not account for all sensory experiences involved in the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Seidman, 2013). As such, remembering the experience in the there-and-then provides descriptions of the event as well as meanings ascribed after its occurrence versus reconstructing the experience in the here-and-now which provides insight into the primary subjective experience (Giorgi, 2009; Seidman, 2013). Following other phenomenological approaches, the interview questions are broadly framed to allow for the participant to provide an in-depth narrative description (Seidman, 2013). There is no interview script informed by the literature review or previous knowledge of the researcher therefore allowing space for the participant to move beyond context and into the psychological experience of the phenomenon.

Analysis Process

Descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis includes a series of steps to ensure the epistemological rigor of the analysis and validity of the eidetic structural description. The steps include: (a) reading the entire interview transcript to get a holistic understanding of the experience, (b) coding for meaning units, (c) transforming meaning units into third person, and (d) analyzing the meaning units for constituents which form the core structural description of the phenomenon as lived (Giorgi, 2009, 2012). As described by Giorgi (2009) “the psychological structure is not a definition of the phenomenon. It is meant to depict how certain phenomena that get named are lived, which includes experiential and conscious moments seen from a psychological perspective” (p. 166). Throughout the analysis process the *invivo* text of the subject is preserved to uncover the changes in psychological meaning which become the meaning units. Meaning units are then examined using imaginative variation, to uncover the subjective processes in the lifeworld, constituents, who describe the *of-ness*, intentional relation of subject towards object which arises as the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2018). Constituents are the building blocks of a psychological process which describes the essential core structure of the phenomenon as it appears to the consciousness of the experiencer (Giorgi, 2008, 2009, 2012). This final structural description is also a representation of the relationships between the constituents.

It is important to clarify the difference between themes derived from hermeneutic analysis like Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and constituents. Constituents are interdependent steps of the psychological process of conscious awareness e.g., how an experience of an object becomes a conscious experience to the experiencer (Giorgi, 2009). The relationships between constituents have a specific order, and the phenomenon is conditioned upon all constituents being experienced. As such, the constituents are necessary in order for the phenomenon to psychologically exist. In comparison, themes, uncovered by hermeneutic phenomenology, are independent elements describing the different interactions existing between subject and object, which create the lived nature within phenomenon. Unlike constituents, themes are not confined to a particular order, nor is there a condition that all themes have to be present for the phenomenon to consciously exist. Meaning themes can be uniquely experienced within phenomenon without threatening its existence. Therefore, descriptive phenomenological psychological methodology and analysis uncovers the universal structural description of how phenomena are psychologically experienced, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology, like IPA, uncovers common elements which are uniquely lived within phenomena.

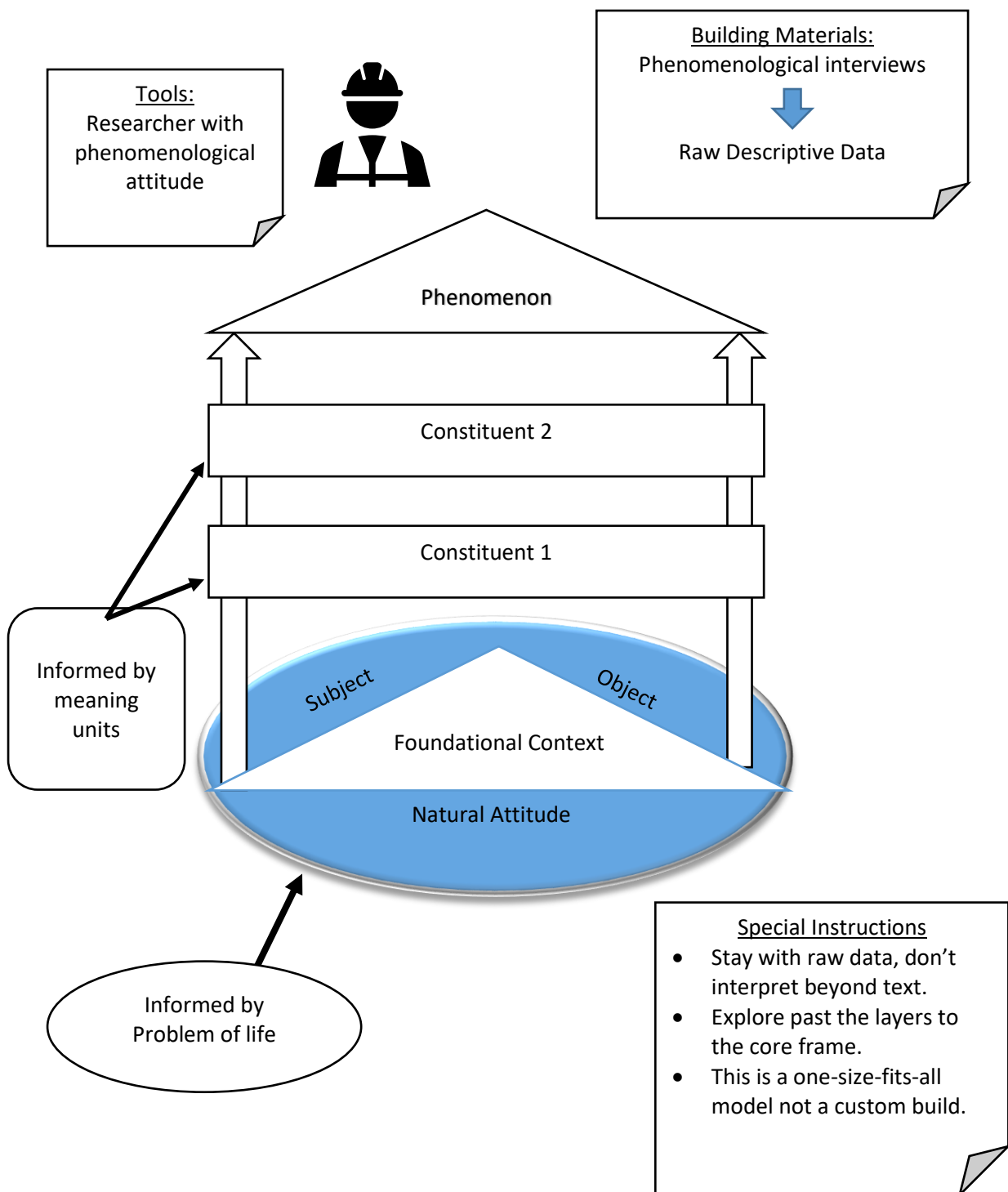
Phenomenological House a Framework for Structural Essence

The phenomenological house is a metaphorical framework for describing descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis. It originated out of a necessity to bridge the gap between the descriptive phenomenological research and the community of focus (Leigh-Osroosh & Hutchison, 2019). Descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis is difficult to understand, therefore, finding a framework to explain the research process and disseminate the results to the broader community is a unique challenge. It was most important that the framework be reliable allowing it to be used by researchers with varying levels of expertise, who wish to implement a descriptive phenomenological study, but who struggle to access a knowledgeable mentor.

The Blueprints

The blueprints of the phenomenological house inform the researcher of their role and approach to the work and include the principles described in the beginning of this manuscript. Figure 1.1 is a pictorial representation of the blueprints.

Figure 1.1.
Phenomenological House “Blueprints”



Giorgian methodology posits phenomena have a core epistemological structure which describes the intentional relationship of participant (subject) and phenomenon (object) (Vagle, 2018). The problem of life question is informed by the researcher's natural attitude but includes a naivete which gives space for the context to be informed from the participant's lifeworld. Therefore, the problem of life under exploration not only determines the methodology, but also sets the foundation for how the participant reconstructs their experience of the phenomenon. Layered on the foundation are the constituents (lifeworld meaning units) which form the core structural description. They are the psychological building blocks which are necessary supports which form the phenomenon, the roof. Therefore, the foundational context and relationships between the constituents create the psychological frame of the phenomenological house, and the blueprints are the steps in approaching the exploration.

The Building Materials

Phenomenological interviews provide the building materials for constructing the structural essence of the phenomenon. It is the process of walking with the participant as they reconstruct their experience. As the participant describes how the phenomenon was experienced, they provide the researcher with an abundance of raw material. Phenomenological interviews guide the participant to describe the significant sensory experiences that first come to mind, as if they are describing the main rooms of a house. Then they are asked by the architect (researcher) to engage in reconstructing those rooms in greater detail i.e., function, furniture, character, and meaning. In this way the house is the object for which the subject (participant) engages and creates the intentional relationship of which is studied. At times, the researcher may guide the participant back into a previous room to dive into greater descriptive depth. This process tasks the participant with moving away from memory (common themes) and immerse themselves in the reconstruction as if they were currently experiencing that phenomenon. Ultimately, the interview experience provides a rich description of the experienced phenomenon, the building material, which describes the structural essence.

Design

Imaginative variation (phenomenological reduction) is conducted throughout the research process, and most importantly when beginning analysis. The researcher is the architect who is given the blueprints (phenomenological attitude) and raw materials (participant narrative). To ensure that the framing of the structural essence best fits with the reconstructed phenomenon they must bracket out their perspective, relationship, and interpretation of how the structure should look. The blueprints guide the work and provide the context, they do not dictate the final outcome. Similarly, the participant's interview provides a rich subjective description which shapes the structural essence, but the final structure represents a frame that can also explain the experiences of others who have also lived the phenomenon, it is not a custom mold. This begs the question; how does the architect uncover the frame?

The first step in Giorgian descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis tasks the researcher with reading the raw data to form a holistic understanding of the description (Giorgi, 2009). *The architect sits with the raw materials observing it all without judgment.* Then using imaginative variation (phenomenological reduction) the researcher reads the raw data for shifts in psychological meaning. These shifts are the meaning units which come from the participant, not assigned by the researcher bias, or grouped into commonalities/themes. *The architect examines the raw materials noting which materials ascribe to different psychological meanings.* The meaning units are then transformed into third person, an engagement in epoche which partitions the participants from the phenomenon. *The architect removes the assigned*

labels and characteristics specific to the owner. Continuing the phenomenological reduction, the researcher examines the transformed meaning units for underlying psychological tenets/constituents which, exist across participants experiences. *The architect looks beyond the wallpaper, furniture, objects, etc. until they arrive at the frame that holds the house together.* The researcher examines the constituents for epistemological significance. Are they a necessary piece to the psychological experiencing of this phenomenon? *The architect examines the frame seeing which beams are necessary in supporting the roof and which can be removed.* The result is a descriptive structure of the phenomenon which aligns with the experience of the participant and is generalizable to others who have participated in a similar relationship with the phenomenon. Result: the architect has the frame that can be used to describe the psychological structural essence of the phenomenon. The structure can then be shared with the broader community to describe how the phenomenon is universally experienced while prompting further research into the subjective ontological aspects (Giorgi, 2009).

Case Example: An Exploration of Chan Meditation

A counseling psychologist concerned about the isolation and anxiety brought on by the social distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic is exploring possible interventions to help their clients cope. They are familiar with mindfulness practices, but never utilized them within therapy. One meditation practice that seems like a possible fit is Chan Buddhist meditation. Before recommending this to clients, the psychologist wants to know how this practice is psychologically experienced by new practitioners in order to be prepared to work through the process with clients. They have limited knowledge of Chan meditation and no relationship with any current practitioner. As such, the researcher does some preliminary exploration of the literature to ensure that it is a safe practice, however, they do not investigate further into previous research investigating the subjective experience of the practice. The researcher makes an intentional effort not to conflate their previous knowledge with the experiences of participants. The resulting problem of life under exploration becomes: *What is the new practitioner experience of Chan meditation?*

Gathering the Building Materials

The researcher recruits five participants who have recently started participating in an online Chan practice. Each participant is interviewed once for a 90-minute phenomenological interview centered around the prompt, "Please reconstruct your first experience of Chan meditation". The interviews continue with prompts asking the participants to describe more about the phenomenon that is, sensory, cognitive, and subjective experiences. The researcher has a range of various prompts and follows the unique narrative of each participant concluding with the meaning each has gained from the experience. The researcher is aware of their biases that arise during the course of each interview but does not engage in autoethnography, memo writing, or initial analysis. Their focus remains on the here-and-now of the interview with that particular participant.

Analysis: Uncovering the Frame

Once transcribed, each interview is read from beginning to end and the researcher continues working from epoche by refraining from writing down any memos or reflective notes. The focus is on gaining a holistic sense of the narrative. Upon the second read the researcher begins to highlight shifts in psychological meaning. This task is informed by the researcher's natural attitude as a counseling psychologist understanding how underlying

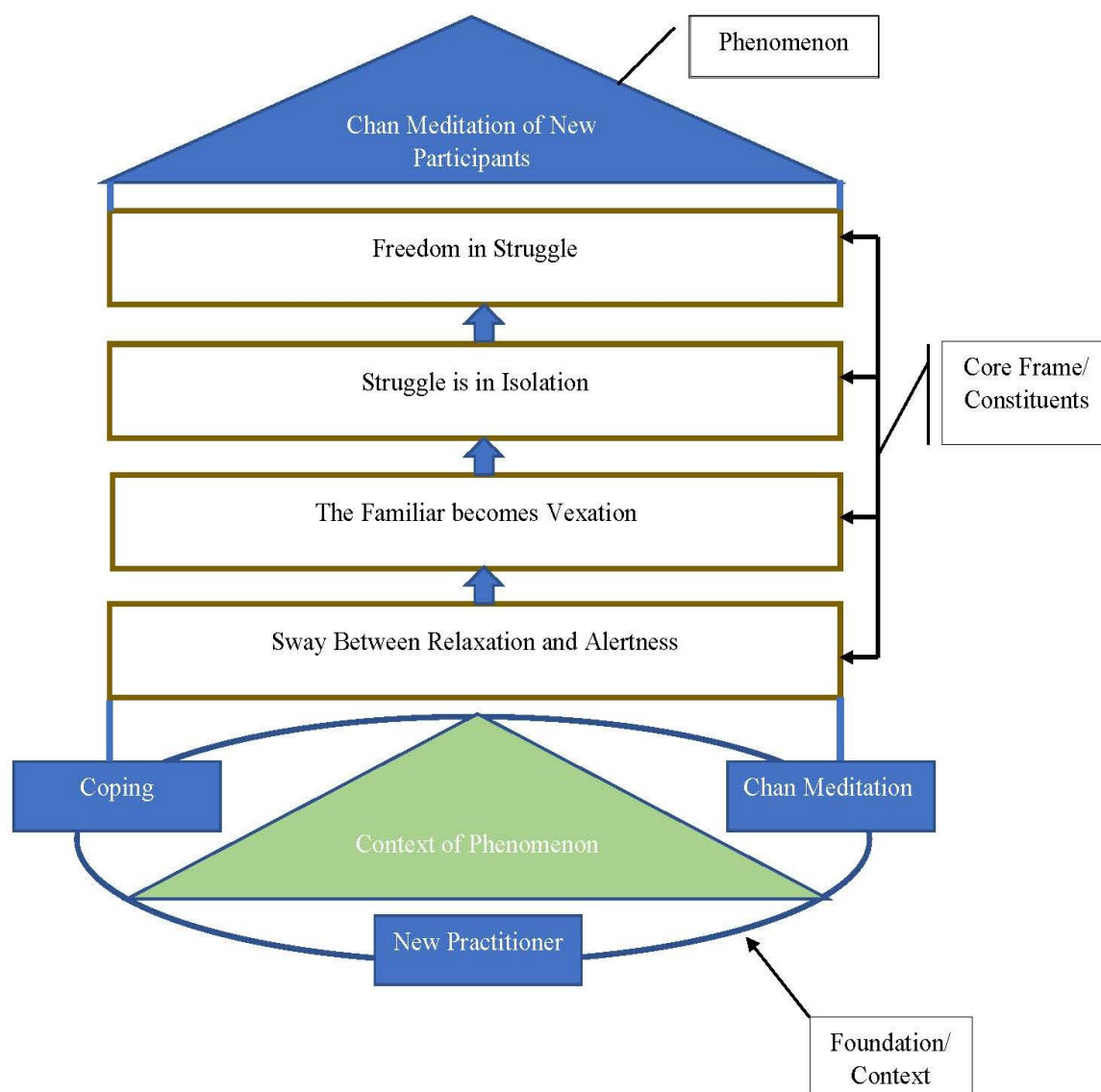
psychological shifts present themselves in storytelling. The following is an example excerpt from an interview.

The warm-up was fun. The swaying of my arms back and forth, as my hips rocked felt like a flutter of short embraces/ as well as a kickstart to remind me to stay alert. It didn't seem difficult but after a few minutes it became difficult to stay focused on just relaxing in the sway. I had to remind myself to just relax.../ Funny, when something that seems familiar and at first relaxing, becomes...well, a vexation. / Vexation, that's one of the new words I learned through this practice, how we struggle with vexations. Like when I sat down to meditate for the first time. I felt really relaxed, but then when we closed our eyes my mind began to race. / The room I was practicing in was my bedroom, a place that is very familiar, but as I sat in the meditation...the familiar became a struggle. My thoughts were familiar, the sounds around me, familiar, / and I struggled to refocus back on my breath. Then my breath became a struggle. / Fortunately, around this time the teacher leading the meditation told us "No thought." I don't know why it was reassuring, / maybe it was just like my arms swaying hitting my back, a reminder to be alert, but also let go.

The diagonal lines denote where the researcher found shifts in psychological meaning. These shifts are the meaning units of the text and vary in length. These meaning units are not organized or deconstructed but shifted into third person. For example, the meaning unit "...and I struggled to refocus back on my breath. Then my breath became a struggle," transformed into "...and they struggled to refocus back on their breath. Then their breath became a struggle." This shift removes the "I" of the participant from the data and provides the researcher an intentional perspective on how the phenomenon is universally experienced versus individually.

Now that the researcher has the raw materials it is time to utilize imaginative variation to reveal the descriptive structural essence, frame, of new practitioner experience of Chan meditation. This tasks the researcher with examining the relations of the meaning units while staying within the context of the narrative that is, remaining with the *in vivo* text. The *of-ness* is described as psychological building blocks, constituents, of how the experience becomes consciously known by the participant. Just like a house, there is a structure to the constituents where one cannot exist unless the supporting constituents are present. For example, after transforming all the narratives into third person meaning units, the researcher reads through and examines how each meaning unit presented itself. In doing so they arrive at these constituents "sway between relaxation and alertness"; "the familiar becomes vexation," "struggle in isolation," "freedom in struggle." Figure 1.2 visually represents the descriptive structure using the phenomenological house framework.

Figure 1.2
Structural Essence New Practitioners of Chan Meditation



The constituents are interrelated, and the structural essence captures the psychological process, new practitioners of Chan meditation. It is an epistemological structure which addresses what is necessary to be known of the subject-object relationship for the experience to consciously occur and provides space for describing the interrelations unique to the phenomenon. The researcher can use the phenomenological house metaphorical framework to describe how the experience of each constituent led to the next, finally arriving at the conscious experiencing of the phenomenon. Depending on the population of focus, the researcher may decide to provide examples of the subjective ontological experiences to acknowledge the significance of the unique narratives contributed to the study, however, they must posit that the unique subjective elements are not universal (Leigh-Osroosh & Hutchison, 2019). For example, vexation is a subjective element which has several interpretations of how it is experienced both within and through Chan meditation, but the essential psychological constituent, “familiar becomes vexation,” is essential to the intentional relation between subject (new practitioner) towards object (Chan meditation).

Utilizing the Framework

In this particular case example, the researcher can use this structure to understand how their clients will psychologically experience Chan meditation. When suggesting it as a coping intervention the psychologist can use the structural description to inform the participant of what they will likely experience, while also providing space for them to process their own unique subjective experience of being in the practice. Clients will have a generalized knowledge of what it will be like to experience the phenomenon without the restrictions on how individually it will feel. There is also no judgment or value placed on the constituents which provides further space for clients to assign their own meaning. Therefore, the structural essence provides the frame for each individual to build their own unique experience while maintaining the universal psychological experiences that are necessary for the existence of the phenomenon to occur.

Discussion

Descriptive phenomenology is not without limitations. The philosophical richness of phenomenological methods is rooted in western European individualism which fails to acknowledge nor understand indigenous and collectivist epistemologies which center relationality. Specifically, Giorgi's phenomenological psychological approach is rooted in the philosophical principles of natural attitude and epoche. It has been argued that these principles maintain researcher bias because the analysis process does not include co-construction with participants (Vagle, 2018). As such, the researcher's experience could become interwoven into the constituents leading to a structural description which fails to fully capture the universal psychological essence of the phenomenon. Furthermore, researchers utilizing descriptive methodology need to acknowledge the eidetic generalizability of the resulting structural description, meaning, the structure is limited to the conditions of the participants experience (Giorgi, 2006, 2009). Although others' experiences may align with the results, it cannot be said that the structural description is true for anyone at any time, context, or space. Lastly, the phenomenological house framework is limited to the Giorgi phenomenological psychological approach (Giorgi, 2006, 2009). Researchers wanting to utilize descriptive phenomenology outside of the Giorgi approach would need to find a different tool.

Trustworthiness

Descriptive phenomenology upholds research rigor when approached with competency and consistency with the method. Researchers who conduct descriptive phenomenological studies, but fail to explore the philosophical underpinnings, blueprints, of their primary research question, often utilize a phenomenological methodology which does not align with the intentionality of their research question threatening the trustworthiness of the study (Giorgi, 2006, 2009; Vagle, 2018). I have witnessed this occur with doctoral students who want to pursue descriptive phenomenology but approach it as a hermeneutic or grounded theory study. Epoche is key to decreasing the chances of threats to internal validity. This is especially important during analysis when researchers can mistakenly center the in-depth subjective descriptions of the constituents, the phenomenon's hermeneutic elements, instead of the broader descriptive structural essence (Giorgi, 2006, 2009). By using the phenomenological framework, researchers can catch this error when they attempt to describe the phenomenological frame, but struggle to move beyond the descriptions of individual constituents.

Another unique quality of descriptive phenomenological analysis is the absence of a validity check. Traditionally within qualitative research a validity check is conducted to strengthen the internal validity of the results by providing participants an opportunity to audit their narratives before final analysis. However, the philosophical underpinnings of descriptive phenomenology dictate that the essence of phenomenon can only be found through reconstruction of the primary experience (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1913/1983). As such, a traditional validity check would be asking the participant to edit a different phenomenon than the one under examination, their telling of their experience versus their experiencing of the phenomenon. Researchers who wish to include a validity check in their descriptive study can do so by providing participants the resulting structural description and asking them to write about their experience of the results. Their written description of their experience of the descriptive structure can then be shared alongside the results (Leigh-Osroosh, 2019). In sharing the participants' experiences of the results, the researcher works to address the potential bias while preserving the epistemological structural core of the experienced phenomenon. Ultimately, descriptive phenomenology does not sacrifice trustworthiness, and researchers with a well-grounded understanding of its philosophical tenets and analysis process can conduct rigorous qualitative studies exploring phenomena.

Implications

The purpose of this manuscript was to provide a metaphoric tool, the phenomenological house framework, as a guide for researchers utilizing Giorgian's phenomenological psychological descriptive analysis. In concert with existing literature, it provides researchers a step-by-step process for approaching analysis to uphold the trustworthiness of the resulting structural description. While the metaphoric description and figures provide pictorial schemas to understand the philosophical tenets of phenomenological reduction, the case study provides description of what each step looks like in practice. Additionally, the framework can also be used as a model for disseminating the results to various communities in a manner which reduces the philosophical language allowing for easier understanding by the audience without sacrificing its richness. Readers choosing to pursue this methodology will need to conduct further exploration to form a sound understanding. For researchers new to phenomenology, I recommend Vagle (2018) *Crafting Phenomenological Research*, which provides a thorough description of phenomenological methodologies. Overall, the phenomenological house is a tool to bridge rich phenomenological research to the broader community without sacrificing trustworthiness.

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