

Karin Dahlberg, Nancy Drew and Maria Nyström (2001). **Reflective Lifeworld Research**. Studentlitteratur, Lund. (259 pages.)

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Qualitative research comes with various forms and faces, and, fortunately, there now exist numerous books that deal with issues related to qualitative research. Not that many books, however, deal explicitly and extensively with the transformation and application of principles of phenomenology and hermeneutics. *Reflective Lifeworld Research* is written as a response to this apparent need. It is, moreover, a response to the frustration caused by the current, and historical, shortage of research into concrete, lived, subjective experiences and their meanings for recipients of various practices, mainly health care recipients and students. The book is, as such, both timely and important. It is a useful contribution to a field that has frequently been investigated through a more positivistic lens.

*Reflective Lifeworld Research* is an introductory text that reviews, discusses and summarises central considerations of the philosophy of phenomenology and hermeneutics, transforming them into principles of research into concrete, lived experience. The three authors are nurses as well as teachers of various health care practices who, in this book, attempt to answer the question: how might qualitative research based upon phenomenology and hermeneutics be conducted? Such a question is not easily answered as there is no one approach that defines either phenomenology or hermeneutics. The authors have chosen to draw upon the philosophy of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer, all great philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who have developed intricate and exquisite structures of thought. Condensing and discussing their philosophies and converting them into cohesive principles for practical application are indeed difficult tasks. I am tempted to say that the authors' boldness has led to a Janus-like result: the book is excellent as it does something new and necessary, but it lacks the nuanced language that the treatment of these philosophers requires. The authors do not, however, intend the book to be more than an introductory text to the topic and the above statement may, therefore, be too strong a judgement as the authors purport to give nothing more than they deliver.

The book begins with a chapter on the nature of paradigms and their influence on research. Here the authors attempt to give answers to complex questions and the solutions they propose are at times too simple for these convoluted issues, as, for instance, when they claim that paradigms change as a function of the researchers' conscious effort. To me, such a statement demands thorough backing up before taken for good fish and a more nuanced approach seems warranted. The next chapter deals with philosophical themes and goals of phenomenology and hermeneutics. With regards to phenomenology they explicate and discuss essential topics

such as the first person perspective, the natural attitude, intentionality, the lifeworld, transcendence and intersubjectivity. Considering hermeneutics they review its variations against its historical development, discussing topics such as meaning, understanding, pre-understanding, context and tradition. The chapter is a useful one, weaving a historical matrix to obtain an overview of the intertwined fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The chapter also facilitates for the third one, an important one in which they continue to examine philosophical themes of these traditions but also make them directly applicable to empirical research, i.e.: they delineate a method for describing and understanding phenomena of the lifeworld and their meanings. They do so by discussing themes like openness, richness of descriptions and processes of interpretation in relation to features such as understanding, pre-understanding, self-awareness, self-reflection, uniqueness and generalization. They give examples of how these methodological issues have been studied and strived for, thereby creating a nice balance through a more abstract discussion that is juxtaposed with empirical examples. Then, in the fourth chapter they are concerned with methods of data gathering for lifeworld research. It is a “how to” gather data in the form of narrative descriptions, interviews (also discussing the difference between narratives arrived at through interviews versus “solitary writing”), fieldwork and observation. In the fifth chapter, a particularly good one, data analysis and presentation are the issues at hand. They present means of analysis that facilitates for the discovery of meanings through the intertwined processes of description and interpretation. Concrete, practical advice of how to carry out analysis of lifeworld research is presented. Various issues related to the uncovering of meanings are discussed and they give examples of their own experience of data analysis and presentation.

Chapter six, the final one, deals briefly with the longstanding debates of generalization and validity in qualitative research. The chapter fulfils its goal of giving an overview but is not sufficient as one’s only source of literature if a mature research project is to be undertaken. It does, however, pose relevant questions and triggers curiosity. For instance, does the lifeworld contain essential properties of experience that can be discovered (the phenomenological reduction), and can one, thereby, arrive at descriptions that capture invariant properties of meaning? Or, rather, is experience caused by the unique circumstances of a particular spacetime with its plurality of intervening forces, making the description valid mainly for a particular occurrence at a particular location and at a particular time. Here the authors come to the conclusion that qualitative research can have relevance beyond the specific context in which it is conducted.

Overall, then, the book leads to an increased understanding of the assumptions, concepts and methods that are in use in phenomenology and hermeneutics, and will, moreover, facilitate for qualitative research summoned upon their principles. There are, however, a few points that I would like to point out: The book broaches topics of ethics, but chooses not to deal with such issues extensively. The book is therefore nicely complimented by other relevant texts on the issue. Moreover, they only implicitly discuss how to deal with the decentred subject, i.e.: the difficult question of how to account for the context that influences subjective experience.

Summarised, I do find the book useful. I find it especially useful that someone investigates the relevance of hermeneutics and, additionally, transforms it into a research method of describing and interpreting experience and its meanings. It is, indeed, an added bonus as it appears to be a less recognised tool for qualitative research. The book, however, lacks the nuanced approach and refined language that characterises great scholarly work, but is, as an introductory text, both constructive and valuable. It is a good starting point for further explication of phenomenological and hermeneutic methods and contains an honest attempt at making principles of phenomenology and hermeneutics available for empirical research.