
II. EDUKOLOGIJA EDUCATION SCIENCE

REFLEXIVITY AND SCIENTIFIC RIGOROUSNESS: TESTIMONY FROM REFLECTIVE LIFEWORLD STUDIES

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Abstract

Phenomenological research is one of the most prominent qualitative research strategies. It is quite different research approach in terms of scientific rigorousness. Being part of qualitative research, phenomenological research holds same attributes of rigorousness as all scientific research – objectivity, validity generalizability. Just those attributes manifest differently in a different types of research. One attribute – reflexivity of a researcher is a prominent feature of phenomenological research, that speaks for scientific rigorousness with a same strength as the rest attributes. The author of this paper argues that reflexivity of a researcher is one of major and strongest scientific attributes of a scientific rigor. Arguments come from reflective lifeworld research philosophy and methodology as well as original research illustrations from Lithuania and the Netherlands.

Keywords: scientific rigor, reflexivity, phenomenology, reflective lifeworld research

Introduction

The concept of reflexivity is quite widely explored (Attia & Edge, 2017; Berger, 2015; Bridges, 2014; Edge, 2011; Finlay, 2012; Forbes, 2008; Mann, 2016; Sandywell, 1996; Schön, 1983) as important part of qualitative research. M. Attia & J. Edge (2017) suggest two approaches on the concept – developmental and applied. Developmental approach means a process of becoming reflective researcher. Applied approach stands for practised reflexivity during research process. J. Edge (2011) argues that reflexivity is made of two interconnected and equally important parts – prospective and retrospective reflection, practised during research process. Prospective reflexivity has to do with preparation phase – thinking about research question, type and strategy of a research, methods to be used. Retrospective reflexivity has to do with thinking about results of a research. D. Schön (1983) suggests another classification of reflexivity: reflection-in action, reflection on action. Reflection – in action has to do with acting and thinking that builds knowledge and understanding about certain phenomenon, and a person who explores it. Reflection on action has to do with thinking about experienced process, action, problems solved. D. Schön (1983) argues, that practitioners are capable to do both – reflect in and on action and it helps to cope with uncertainty, conflicts, not typical situations.

There are more sorts, types, of reflexivity classified in a scientific literature. But it is not the aim of this article to analyse all of them. The aim of this article is to disclose reflexivity as a phenomenological concept, that it is grounded in ontology and epistemology, inscribed into methodological requirements. Reflexivity is a natural and necessary attribute of scientific rigorousness. “Reflexivity can only be as strong, as rigorous, as our knowledge base and our abilities to continually and critically interrogate our knowledge and constructions. If we accept and understand that reflexivity is the task of analysing one’s own experiences in the fieldwork” (Pillow, 2010, p.275). It means, that reflexivity includes sensitivity, openness, sincerity of a researcher as well as critical view upon oneself a researcher. Those two concepts – reflexivity and rigorousness are in the focus of this article. They are disclosed in a phenomenological, namely Reflective Lifeworld Research, by presenting evidence of two doctoral studies, carried out in Lithuania and the Netherlands.

1. Theoretical aspects

1.1. Scientific rigor in phenomenological research

In phenomenology researchers choose to apply more human and existential terms to human science (Finlay, 2009). A term “scientific rigour” is used not so often (Applebaum, 2012; de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Reading phenomenological literature, sometimes it looks like there are two opposite “camps” – one advocating for a more rigid and another one for more flexible approach. On the one side e.g. A. Giorgi (1997) with systemic, methodological, critical and general approach to phenomenological research, and on the other side e.g. M. van Manen (2001, 2014) and T. Saevi (2005), contributing with artistic

descriptions of anecdotes. As a third alternative and with a strong foundation in philosophy of science, K. Dahlberg, H. Dahlberg & M. Nystrom (2008) explain how the concepts objectivity, validity and generalizability can be understood and practiced in phenomenological studies to produce good evidence. Their approach to scientific rigour is in line with their arguments for how research can contribute to a better understanding of existential matters.

It would be difficult to deny peculiarities of different traditions, schools and methods, as well as approaches that demand scientific rigor. But it would also be difficult to deny common features that stand for any phenomenological work as rigorous science. True phenomenological research, in spite of variations, stands on a solid ontological, epistemological and methodological ground, laid by especially E. Husserl (1989), M. Merleau-Ponty (2012) and H. G. Gadamer (1975) together with M. Heidegger (1962) on ontological as well as ethical matters in particular.

Phenomenology means universal, and in radical sense, rigorous science <...> based on ultimate self-responsibility, in which hence, nothing held to be obvious, either predictively or pre-predictively, can pass, unquestioned, as a basis for knowledge. It is, I emphasize, an idea, which, as the further meditative interpretation will show, is to be realized only by way of relative and temporary validities and in infinite historical process – but in this way it is, in fact, realizable (Husserl, 1989, p. 406).

With his famous words of going back to the thing itself, E. Husserl (1989) presented a new foundation of rigorousness. As researchers we need to be open, close and sensitive to the phenomenon in order to understand it and reflect upon it. Understanding is not stable, but moves within an ever changing context as well as with researchers' ability to subjectively study the world as it is perceived – in a scientifically objective manner. In phenomenological research it means recognition of one's intersubjective relationships with the world objects, acknowledgment of personal knowledge and purposeful methodical efforts to bracket the taken for granted idea that the world is precisely as it seems to be. Such efforts have to do with reduction. Practising it preserves from too early and biased understanding of meaning, it protects from the temptation to make unnecessary references to existing theories and from not wrong conclusions. The phenomenological reduction, as a quality control equipment, is always accompanied by reflection and self-reflection on researchers' part. It helps to timely detect the phenomenon of research, to notice how and in what forms it manifests and how it correlates with personal experiences (Thompson & Zahavi, 2007).

Richness and diversity of phenomenological traditions, schools and methodologies speak for phenomenology as a solid science, applicable in any sphere of a human life. A rigorous phenomenological study has to fulfil following criteria: a) to have solid theoretical-philosophical and methodical background; b) to maintain coherence of theoretical and methodical principals during research (pre)process; c) to declare subjectivity of a researcher and prove how it is managed (van Wijngaarden et al., 2017). Rigorousness of

findings is not hidden inside them, but comes with a scientific way of thinking and an accurate, precise, sensible and reflective process of a research.

1.2. Scientific rigor in Reflective Lifeworld Research

Reflective lifeworld research (RLR) defines scientific quality by the concepts *objectivity*, *validity* and *generality* that all together stand for scientific rigor or “evidence” in this approach (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008; Dahlberg, 2013; van Wijngaarden et al., 2017). Objectivity is often understood as a detached stance. RLR, as other phenomenological approaches, acknowledges the unavoidable subjectivity, which is involved in all kinds of research. As mentioned above, the concept of objectivity is grounded in a phenomenological epistemological understanding of reality, which is always context based and subjectively perceived. Objectivity is reached through the disclosing and description of all singular meaning, and not least through an awareness of how meanings come to be. The concept of validity is strongly tied with objectivity and speaks for original insights into the otherness of the researched phenomena. Both objectivity and validity claim that the methods that are chosen in the research have a potential to reveal the main meanings of a phenomenon. The focus is upon meaning, which is disclosed in rich data and sound descriptive or interpretive analysis. RLR also aims at revealing both unique characteristics and the essential meanings of researched phenomena. Unique meaning comes as a testimony of individual experiences that are related with a phenomenon, which manifests in concrete moments, actions, events and environments and is lived through by a person. However, in order to fulfil the goals of generality, RLR also embraces the essential meaning of phenomena, i.e. a structure of meaning, which specifies and displays phenomena and distinguishes them from other ones.

It is clear, that objectivity and validity are not just philosophical or theoretical, but also empirical practical research standards. The question is how to practice them. RLR suggests a phenomenological attitude, which means following the main principles of openness, bridling, reflection and self-reflection within the whole research process.

A researcher who is characterized by openness is present in the encounter with the respondent, ready to meet something unexpected and new, to experience wonder, and to be surprised. “Openness is the mark of true willingness to listen, see and understand. It involves respect and certain humility towards the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility. To be open means to conduct research on behalf of the phenomenon” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 98). A way to reach openness is through bridling, which means to practice an aware and dwelling kind of stance towards the phenomenon, being careful not to define it too quickly or without enough reflection. Bridling further means suspension, in the meaning of putting on hold, of personal and professional knowledge, resistance to build research on already existing theories, withstand temptation to see what is not here, or to add surplus meaning to a phenomenon under research. Both the idea of openness and bridling include reflexivity in relation both to oneself as researcher and the whole research process. Reflection and self-reflection are connected with self-awareness and mean conscious account on one’s personal position in the research, thoughtful and

responsible investigation of one's own mind as well as one's choices and actions during the research activity.

One thing is to declare those principles, and another thing is to practice them. This is a challenging methodological task for any researcher. It requires awareness, attentiveness, slowness and self-discipline during the whole process of a research.

2. Practising reflexivity in a research

The phenomenological attitude is practiced all through the research. At the very beginning of the research, bridling, openness, critical self-questioning and self-reflection are practiced by asking questions: What makes me interested in this phenomenon? Where does it exist? What do I already know about it? What do I want to understand and to find out? Such questions notify openness to a phenomenon, a research question, to a research situation and to oneself as researcher. A researcher practicing RLR has to pose research questions without predicted hypotheses or theories to be tested, or answers that are there already. Openness to a research question means eagerness to get authentic answers, readiness to involve oneself in an interesting investigation, to experience existence, life and wonder. However, such openness does not mean any kind of "tabula rasa", because every researcher has to know where, in what context, the phenomenon can be found. Otherwise an investigation would not be at all possible. The researcher also has to know what is already known about the phenomenon and understand the limits of knowledge.

E. van Wijngaarden (2016), professional and experienced existential counsellor, describes her interest in studying lived experiences of older people, who consider their lives to be completed and no long worth living, in a very personal way:

The seeds for this thesis were planted in my mind in 2010. At that time, I saw documentary at the television which was called "Incurably Old" <...>. When I saw this movie, I was touched by the story of Ans. It made me wonder about the underlying motivations and experiences of people like Ans. What does it mean to feel that you have lived your life, that life is considered to be completed? Why does someone choose to end his life, while not suffering from a serious mental or physical illness? To what extent can this be seen as a rational choice? <...> The story of Ans sparked my wonder about this phenomenon and can be seen as the starting point of this research project (van Wijngaarden, 2016, p. 14)

The researcher, in spite of her professional background, and experience, acknowledges her limited knowledge in this sphere and declares a sincere interest to know what it means when life seems to be completed and no longer worth living. She sensitively describes and objectively explains her early interest in lived experiences of old people who think that their lives are not worth living by one concrete example. Such writing immediately captures a reader's attention and makes one believe in the importance of the author's questions.

D. Penkauskiene (2016), university teacher and trainer of adult learners presents her way to defining phenomenon in focus at the very beginning of doctoral studies. She shares her personal thoughts about what have helped to come to the true phenomenological question:

I have chosen “rethinking of learning” to be my research object. My decision was based on few things. First, on my personal experience. I myself very often raise questions of such character: What I have learned and if I have learned something? What is from that, that I have learned – what I can do with it? If my learning is beneficial for me only, of it has value for someone else? Second, on students learning examples. While observing students at university, I wondered why ones take teachers challenge to think independently and others strive to guess what teacher expects, what is the right answer? Why ones say they have learned something and others – not? Those questions made me understand, that I do not know, what students really think about their learning and if they raise similar questions as I do. But still I was not on my direct track to the research <...> until I read M. Heidegger’s collection of lectures “What is called thinking?” <...>. Heidegger’s controversial claim, that essential life questions provoke thinking, but it does not mean that people think, unlocked formulation of the research question. I got curious, what it means to re-think learning while experiencing provocation? What kind of provocation it has to be? How it is experienced? What difference it makes for students learning and lives? (Penkauskiene, 2016, p. 62).

This example shows how the chosen research approach depends on personal experience, research interest and how all this, together with some philosophical literature, build a solid background and a point of departure for the research. It also demonstrates that good research questions do not come immediately. Self-questioning and self-reflection take some time until the right decisions are made.

Both examples illustrate how researchers strive for an in depth understanding of the phenomena. There is an urge to reveal their complexity and significance, disclose essential meanings as well as to find unique features. The researchers also present sound arguments for their decision to use the RLR approach. These arguments are built on “philosophical, ontological assumptions about nature of reality and its characteristics” (van Wijngaarden, 2016, p. 29) and the epistemology of embodied, contextual knowledge, born in intentional relations, as well as on the nature of the phenomenon and research questions, that ask to be investigated in a specific way. Researcher personalities, the researchers’ way of thinking, also play a significant role in deciding on research methodology and strategy:

While reading “Reflective Lifeworld Research”, I understood that this respected approach is the most suitable for the personal reasons as well. The idea that bracketing of personal knowledge, pre-understanding, believes is not possible is very close to me. I have to acknowledge that I am not able to get away from my learning and

teaching experience, my expectations and visions. But I do acknowledge that it is in my power to control them – to bridle assumptions, too early decisions, temptation to give more meaning than it is in the phenomenon under research (Penkauskiene, 2016, p. 63).

The researchers' openness in claiming their subjectivity speaks for objectivity of their studies, as they start "from connection instead of detachment <...> thus attempt to understand the world or a phenomenon as something that we are already part of it. All researches must begin in such awareness "(van Wijngaarden, 2016, p. 10). Researchers' task is to stay aware, to be involved and at the same time to keep distance for the sake of the research objectivity. Personal involvement has not to be confused with full immersion into the lifeworlds of the research participants or the phenomena, rather it has to be understood as trying to keep balance between nearness and distance (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Such balance is ensured by a constant move back and forth with the phenomenon in focus and persistent reflection, or put poetically, it is a steady dance between reductive focus and reflexive self-awareness (Finlay, 2008).

An open, bridled and self-reflective attitude has to be kept through the whole research process, in order to let the phenomenon reveal both particularities and essential meanings. RLR suggests that researchers should stop and make pauses, take a closer look at data, emerging meanings and the research question (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The research process can be described as a constant questioning of appearing meaning, as well as constant movement between the whole and the parts, looking back and forth, trying not to lose any meaning. It means full concentration on the phenomenon, being focused on the unique and nuanced meanings, and at the same time keeping an eye on the whole, including the essential meanings.

The meanings emerge from the lived experiences but it is not equal to them. Researchers should not aim at repeating what people say, but at finding deeper layers of their lived experiences. Reflective and critical glances, a methodical approach of getting as close as possible to the essential meaning of phenomenon together with bridled reflection, facilitate the understanding of something new, hidden or unexpected. For illustration, we present two examples, one from Lithuania and one from the Netherlands.

In the Lithuanian study, university students shared their experiences of being provoked to rethink their learning (Penkauskienė, 2016). Some of the students, mostly first year, claimed their wish to be free from the strict academic regulations, rules and requirements. They were happy to have the choice of study modules, flexible forms of studying, independent tasks, and non-rigid assessment. It might look like *id est* examples of provocations. But it is just surface information. Looking closer, the researcher finds out that students not always know what to do with their freedom of choice and independent solutions. It is not freedom per se, but a provoked belief in personal strengths to take on independent decisions that make them to rethink their learning. Students do not long for loose studies, but for directed learning; not for undefined tasks, but for clear guidance; not for free studentship, but for belonging to an academic community.

The Dutch study (van Wijngaarden, 2016) about old people willing to die reveals that not all affirmations to quit lives have to be taken straightforward. People suffer, feel exhausted, describe that they are finished with their lives and claim that they do not see any light in the future. But the interviews show how they also find small hopes and are able to see values of life. The described willingness to die has do to with lost autonomy, independency and dignity, and they want to belong somewhere, to be part of a family, a community, or of a human world:

They are driven by strong human desire to be visible, recognized, wanted, needed, valued, depended upon, or attended to by others. This illustrates the complex ambiguous tension in human life that, regardless of how independent a person might present himself, he is at the same time, a needy, vulnerable who depends heavily on others. To be of significance in the eyes of others and to experience mutual responsibility (by helping, sharing, supporting each other) is of vital importance for one's quality of life and self-esteem (van Wijngaarden, 2016, p. 95).

Lived experiences reveal a tension between existing and desirable situations, between desire of alliance and unity, between wish to die and to live. Those experiences prove the phenomenon of readiness to give up on life to be more multi-dimensional, more relational and context depended than was expected, and consequently not possible to understand or treat in only one way.

The above described examples remind us of how important it is to pay attention not only to separate details, but to the whole phenomenon; not to investigate separate moments or events, but its context as well; not to look at isolated persons, but to their intentional relations with others. This is possible by practising an open, bridled and reflexive attitude, and it is the main “phenomenological answer to the questions of validity and objectivity” (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 28), and to the question of scientific rigor as well.

Both examples illustrate how RLR can advocate for not superficial and one-sided, but rather complex looks at phenomena that previously have been treated in a simplistic way. Both empirical studies give food to thought about what can be changed in caring about old people and in teaching of young people. The findings can inform of what can be done in homes, at hospitals, caring centres, schools and universities, and in other professional areas.

The two research studies speak for the contribution of RLR to existing scientific theories. E. van Wijngaarden's (2016) study contributes to the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, confirming assumptions such as “people with a wish to die are most at risk when two interpersonal themes are simultaneously present namely: thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness” (p. 144). The research findings of provoked rethinking of students learning have been discussed not only in the light of phenomenological philosophy, but has also contributed to cognitive learning theory (“learning through discovery”), confluent learning theory (“to learn is to discover”). The phenomenon of rethinking learning as discovery appeared to be very close to the confluent learning concept (to learn means to discover) by a holistic approach. One of the study reviewers pointed out,

that findings of the research confirm some results of neuroscience about the relation between human decisions and success. Successful decisions depend on three abilities: “to forget” learned patterns of behaviour; to maintain wholeness and coherence of experiences gained in different life periods; to take a fresh look at oneself and the world in order to find something new. Provoked rethinking of learning definitely is connected with braking old patterns and finding new meanings of learning.

Conclusion

Misconceptions about phenomenological research as non-rigorous science are connected with the ontological, epistemological and methodological background of science as positivism. Contextualized subjective knowledge, openness to phenomena, rejection of readymade scientific schemas and theories, constant reflection and self-reflection for a long time used to be considered as weak attributes. But not anymore. Objectivity, validity and generalizability, as marks of scientific rigor, are clearly outlined as a part of Reflective Lifeworld Research as a phenomenological lifeworld oriented approach, which includes epistemological notions of openness, bridling and reflexivity. To acknowledge subjectivity seems to represent a soft approach, but in fact it means strict and tough research principles, leading to objective, valid and generalizable results, able to build theories that can inform practices and national policies. Researchers practising reflexivity in research process have to describe it in a very clear and comprehensive manner in order to make visible, understandable to others outside research. And at the same time to prove used research strategy as a strong one.

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REFLEKTYVUMAS IR MOKSLINIS GRIEŽTUMAS: REFLEKTYVAUS FENOMENOLOGINIO TYRIMO LIUDIJIMAI

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Santrauka

Fenomenologinis tyrimas – viena iškiliausių kokybinių tyrimų strategija, turinti ganėtinai skirtingą požiūrį į mokslinį griežtumą. Žinoma, fenomenologija, kaip ir kiti kokybiniai tyrimai pripažįsta bei laikosi įprastų mokslinio griežtumo reikalavimų – objektyvumo, validumo ir generalizavimo. Esmė yra ta, kad šių požymių raiška yra kiek kitokia. Minėti bruožai reiškiasi savitomis formomis, būdais bei yra atpažįstami iš fenomenologijai būdingų požymių. Vienas iš tokių požymių – reflektyvumas. Jis yra toks pats stiprus ir reikšmingas mokslinio griežtumo bruožas kaip ir įprasti.

Reflektyvumas fenomenologiniame tyrime reiškiasi viso proceso metu – nuo tyrimo strategijos pasirinkimo, tyrimo instrumento konstravimo iki pat pabaigos. Jis reiškiasi tyrėjo atvirumu, jautrumu tyrinėjamo objekto atžvilgiu, savo paties, kaip tyrėjo, nuostatų, požiūrių bei veiksmų kritine refleksija ir savirefleksija.

Šio straipsnio autorė pateikia konkrečių argumentų, paremtų filosofine, metodologine literatūra bei praktiniais pavyzdžiais, apie reflektyvumo sąsajas su moksliniu griežtumu taikant Reflektyvaus fenomenologinio tyrimo strategiją. Atvirumas, išankstinių nuostatų, žinojimo bei skubotų išvadų pažabojimas, refleksija ir savirefleksija – tai pagrindiniai šios tyrimo strategijos bruožai, liudijantys apie tyrimo mokslinį stiprumą. Šie bruožai turi stiprų ontologinį bei epistemologinį pamatą, pagrįstą E. Husserlio, M. Merleau-Ponty, H. G. Gadamerio ir kt. fenomenologinės filosofijos klasikų darbais. Metodologinis pagrindimas – švedų mokslininkės prof. K. Dahlberg, šios tyrimo strategijos autorės. Praktinės iliustracijos – Nyderlandų mokslininkės van Wijngaarden ir šio straipsnio autorės refleksijos apie tyrimo objekto, strategijos, tikslinių grupių pasirinkimą, tyrimo eigą ir rezultatus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: mokslinis griežtumas, reflektyvumas, fenomenologija, reflektyvus fenomenologinis tyrimas.

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