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REFLECTIONS ON A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN'S STORIES OF MANAGING SCHOOLS

IRENE MUZVIDZIWA

University of Kwazulu natal

School of Education and Development

South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the importance of applying a phenomenological approach to women's lived experiences as educational leaders. This paper draws its data mostly from fieldwork conducted in 2004/5 in Zimbabwe. The research was an in-depth qualitative study that was conducted along phenomenological lines with an emphasis on rich contextual detail. The paper explores issues relating to how women educational leaders experienced leadership roles, their perceptions of their roles and the challenges they faced and how they dealt with those challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Research is a way of finding answers to questions, however, the method and methodology of collecting and analysing that information determines the type of results the researcher will come up with. In phenomenological research theory and methodology must be closely associated. Theory must arise out of the process of inquiry itself and be intimately connected with data under investigation. In this view the aim of theory should be explanation and clarification. What is important with phenomenology is that it can be both a theory and a method.

The main thrust of this paper is to demonstrate how phenomenology as a form of inquiry can be both a theory and a methodology and still remain appropriate to the field of study.

This paper is mostly informed by data from a fieldwork conducted in 2004/5 in Zimbabwe. The major focus in this study was to gain an understanding of women's lived experiences of the first group of women to be in leadership positions as primary school heads. The aim was to find out how the women experienced leadership roles, their perceptions of their roles as educational leaders, the challenges they faced and how they dealt with those challenges. The study was an in-depth qualitative study conducted along phenomenological lines with an emphasis on rich contextual detail.

In this paper I seek to reflect critically on the appropriateness of applying a phenomenological approach to the field of study focusing on educational leadership. The paper starts by reflecting on the characteristics of phenomenology and its importance in exploring women stories. In demonstrating how issues concerning women in educational leadership positions were illuminated and how well the method has worked for me in achieving my goals, the strengths and weaknesses of phenomenology are articulated. The paper further explores how phenomenology as an orientation tends to be a theory and a method and how this integration assisted me in achieving my goal of understanding the women's lived experiences.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Phenomenology is characterised by an attitude of openness, flexibility and adoption of non-directive techniques, which allows the investigator to grasp more fully the participants' lived experiences (Kruger 1988). The importance of meaning upon experience is its focus on the interpretation of human

experience. Hence, phenomenologist researchers seek to describe phenomena from the perspective of the participant under study. "Phenomenology ... tries to discover and account for ... meanings in the stream of consciousness" (Giorgi 2003:6).

Using a phenomenological approach thus allowed me to listen to the stories of the women school principals as told by them. Engaging in the complex process of understanding their experiences has the potential to uncover previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience. To understand the participant's world one must first arrive at it by suspension or bracketing of presumptive constructs about it. It is not an easy thing to do, but I had to set aside the knowledge that I previously had about the phenomenon in order to capture the essence of what was being described and not distort it. I relied mostly on in-depth interviews as the major form of data collection.

According to Giorgi (2003:91) "Phenomenological methods are non-inferential in the sense that there are no hypotheses to be tested; evidence resides not in the probabilistic support for a hypothesis, but the *description* of the *essential* significance of the phenomenon". The quote shows that the aim pursued in research is different from that of the natural sciences, which value objectivity as opposed to subjectivity. The term 'method' from a Greek philosophical base means the road to be taken if one wants to reach the desired goal; in other words, the purpose determines which road should be taken (Strasser cited in Stones 1988:145). According to Giorgi (1971 cited in Stones 1985:150), "it is phenomenologically unsound to establish a method that must be used that is prior to and independent of the phenomenon to be investigated".

WHY USE PHENOMENOLOGY?

The use of a phenomenological method was a deliberate commitment to an understanding of the social meaning of women school heads' lived world based on an analysis of their

own accounts. Qualitative research is said to be a powerful tool for learning more about our lives and 'socio-historical context in which we live. I found it more appealing to specifically, use a phenomenological approach since according to Merriam, phenomenology "underpins all qualitative research...a phenomenological study focuses on the essence or structure of an experience" (Merriam 2002:7). From detailed descriptive qualitative accounts, phenomenologists illuminate the intentional meaning of the participant. The central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experiences and to retain the integrity of the phenomenon being investigated and hence, efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2003). In other words, I had to put myself into the shoes of the participants being investigated in order to capture the essence of their experiences. This is one of the key issues of importance justifying the use of this method since, with other methods for instance the positivist approaches they would not have enabled me to engage in such a process.

A phenomenological method allowed the presentation of women's own stories, their understanding of the concept of educational leadership and interpretations of their lived experiences from their own perspective. My knowledge interest was to develop a deeper understanding of leadership and how they experienced it. The importance of this is that participants were given the opportunity to explore their experiences in their own view and to contextualise their personal experience. Hansemark and Albinsson (2004) maintained that the aim of phenomenology is to describe the structure of experiences as they present themselves to consciousness, and also find what is hidden in ordinary experience. My task as a researcher was to enter into dialogue with the participant and listen, in order to capture the essence of the women heads' experiences or perceptions. It is also noteworthy to note that phenomenology gives an

opportunity to both the researcher and the research participants to build trust in one another (van der Mescht 2004).

While collecting and analysing data, I tried to keep my experience and knowledge at a distance to eliminate the risk of 'colouring' my observations and subsequent interpretations of participants' experiences. Furthermore Aanstoos (1983:248) suggested that the analysis should remain "faithful to the descriptive nature of the data" in order to disclose its essential meaning directly rather than on the basis of a hypothetical framework. My pre-understanding, as a researcher, of the women in educational leadership positions, was grounded in a literature-based review of previous research concerning the phenomenon. However as a phenomenologist researcher, each case was recorded according to its uniqueness, rather than generalising it. This is actually one of the unique aspects, of phenomenology – respect for individual experience, thus valuing other people's beliefs and understanding and avoidance of a 'one size fits all' situation.

Phenomenological interview transcripts are interpreted to yield descriptions of lived experiences, to grasp essential psychological meaning through a direct reflective process by the phenomenon. Using a phenomenological method allows the researcher to listen to the stories of the participants as told by them. While the research focus is on meaning and experience and not empowerment, the process of phenomenology tends to empower those who are being researched as the process of reflecting is actually an empowering process.

Bracketing or the process of *epoché*, allows the experience of the phenomenon to be explained in terms of its own intrinsic system of meaning (Wolf 2002). The technique consists of unbiased exploration of consciousness and experience. By bracketing, a phenomenological method aims to achieve a

direct contact with the world as it is lived (Merleau-Ponty cited in Giorgi 2003:91). In order to attend to any phenomenon as it is lived, it is necessary to take what is experienced just as it gives itself in any instance (Moustakas 1994:86). For instance, in my study of women educational leaders' lived experiences; I had to document every experience as it was presented.

The importance of phenomenological method is to "reach and grasp the essences of things appearing in consciousness"(Misiak and Sexton 1973:7). I had to set aside the knowledge that I previously had about the phenomenon in order to capture the essence of what was being described and not distort it. Bracketing according to Pollio *et al.* (1997:47) is characterised as a "suspension of theoretical beliefs, preconceptions and pre-suppositions". It is "a process of removing conceptual biases that may serve to distort one's interpretive version" (Pollio *et al.* 1997:47).

One of the steps of the phenomenological method is 'widerschau' intuition of essences, insights into essences, experiences or cognition of essences. All things become clear and evident through an intuitive-reflective process, and for Husserl, intuition "is the presence to consciousness of essences" (Moustakas 1994:33).

This intuition is the starting point in deriving knowledge of human experience, free of everyday sense impressions and the 'natural attitude'. Husserl called the freedom from supposition (bracketing) the *epoché*, a Greek word meaning to stay away or abstain. In the *epoché*, "we set aside our prejudgements, biases, and preconceived ideas about things as have been mentioned before" (Moustakas 1994). We "invalidate, inhibit and disqualify all commitments with reference to previous knowledge and experience" (Schmitt in Moustakas 1994: 59). On another note, the phenomenological *epoché* "does not eliminate everything, does not deny the reality of everything, does not doubt everything – only the

natural attitude, the biases of everyday knowledge, as a basis for truth and reality", what is doubted are scientific 'facts', the knowing of things in advance, from an external base rather than from internal reflection and meaning (Moustakas 1994:85). This process is a difficult one but I tried to maintain it as best as I could.

While *epoché* is the first step in coming to know things, in phenomenological reduction, the task is that of describing in textural language, the experience and the relationship between phenomenon and the self. Phenomenological reduction according to Wolf (2002) is the process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning of it. This process uncovers the ego (personhood) for which everything has meaning. I managed to document women's views, their descriptions and their explications through this unique process.

The process is actually cyclic because it involves going back and forth and, reading and re-reading. Initially during horizontalisation every statement is treated equally as having equal value. Those statements, which were irrelevant to the topic and the question, were later deleted leaving only the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon. These are also known as horizons. There are those statements that overlap and some that are repeated, and they were also deleted.

Imaginative variation

After phenomenological reduction, the next step in the research process is that of imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994:97) suggested that "the task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meaning through the utilisation of imagination", varying the frames of reference. The purpose of this is to arrive at structural description of an experience. While describing the essential structures of a phenomenon is the major task of imaginative variation, Moustakas added, the

uncovering of the essences, the focusing on pure possibilities, is central to the process as well. A reflective phase is included in the imaginative variation process and many possibilities are examined and explicated reflectively. It is through imaginative variation that the researcher is enabled to derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through phenomenological reduction. It is again through imaginative variation that "the researcher understands that there is not a single inroad to truth, but that countless possibilities emerge that are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of an experience" (Moustakas 1994:99). Through phenomenology, an important methodology is developed for investigating human experiences and one learns to see naively, to value conscious experiences, and to respect the evidence of one's senses and everyday experiences.

Noema and noesis

While each person's experience of the world might contain commonly shared variables, it is less likely that individual experiences can be fully shared by any two people. This makes each experience a "unique and solitary phenomenal reality" (Spinelli 1989:29). The concept of intentionality and its noematic and noetic foci, led Husserl to develop an approach designed to clarify the interpretational factors contained within every experience. Intentionality is comprised of a noema and a noesis. Every intentional experience is noetic. This suggests that the world we perceive is not a neutral fact-world (Fouche 1990:382). In considering the noema-noesis correlate, the question remains, what is the perceived as such? The perceived as such is the noema, the perfect self-evidence is the noesis, and their relationship constitutes the intentionality of consciousness. On the noematic side is the uncovering and explication, the unfolding and becoming distinct of what is actually presented in consciousness.

In any case, we cannot describe any experience as it occurs, "it is only once the experience has occurred that we may both

describe and explain it to some degree of adequacy" (Spinelli 1989:23). Even in the case of women in this study, what they were describing were events of the past. By describing those experiences of the past, the women were automatically reflecting on their experience. Description or explanation can hardly be possible when the process of any experience is taking place. Phenomenological inquiry distinguishes ... between the experience as it occurs (straightforward experience) and reflective experience. Straightforward experience is the activity of experience as it occurs. Reflective experience helps us to formulate meaning and construct the various hierarchies of significance contained within those meanings.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design remains fairly open-ended and negotiable in phenomenological research: it is data through inquiry as mentioned before that should determine the methodology. This means that the researcher should not prescribe the method, and neither should the methodological steps be pre-determined. In the light of the above it is important to note that the procedure used in this study was more of a guideline for the development of a more specific methodology in relation to the phenomenon. The main data-gathering tool in phenomenological research is the in-depth, semi-structured interview (Van der Miescht 2004).

A 'snowball' was used as the chief sampling technique for selecting research participants. According to Patton (2002:237) snowball sampling is an approach for locating "information-rich key informants", that is those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry. The criteria for selection was that research participants for inclusion in the study should have the experience relating to the phenomenon, able to communicate their feelings, thoughts and perceptions about the phenomenon being researched and willingness to share that experience (Stones 1988; Blase and Blase 2003). The

first woman principal was identified using purposive sampling basing on experience, fluency and willingness. I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, and that strengthened the technique. The individual from the relevant population was approached and then the individual assisted in identifying the next member from the same population for inclusion in the sample. Then the sample as a rolling snowball grew in size (Huysamen 1994: 45).

After the first principal was located, her consent to participate in the study was sought before proceeding with discussions involving the study. This was done by providing an information sheet, which participants read and upon indicating understanding and willingness to be involved, signed the consent form. This process was carried out with every participant in the research.

My guiding question for the investigation was *what are the women principals' lived experiences as educational leaders?* To provide a framework for discussion, topics of interest that I hoped to cover were designed to facilitate continuity in descriptions of the women principals as they reflected on their lived experiences. The inquiry was initiated through open discussions and conversations, with questions flowing from the dialogue as it unfolded. In this way, as noted by Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997:33),

...a phenomenological interview cannot (and should not) be conceived as a rule-drive.... For the interview to be a path or way for understanding the life-world of a co-participant, it must be allowed to emerge freely rather than to be constrained by predetermined injunctions

This means that the interview became more of a dialogue which had a flow and coherence. The nature of interviews highlighted in this study facilitated rapport between the researcher and the participant. I had to create a situation in which the participant felt relaxed during the interview process,

and I guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality at this stage. I gave the participants choice of venue where each one of them would feel more comfortable. All of them except for one chose their own offices. One went on leave soon after the introductory visits and so she chose to be interviewed at home.

The use of in-depth open-ended and semi-structured questions allowed the participants to explore their lived experiences. I encouraged the participants to speak freely about the research topic. This helped me to obtain the fullest descriptions of their experiences. I also withheld all my personal views, and the purpose of that was to grasp the *lifeworlds* that the participants regarded as real. The interviews were conducted in an informal and non-directive manner. The advantage of the non-directive or semi-structured interview is its flexibility, which allows the researcher to grasp more fully the participant's experience (Stones, 1988). Another important aspect about open-ended, in-depth interviews is that the researcher can make use of responses to adjust some of the questions. In addition, there is room for questions to be repeated and meanings explained. By adopting a phenomenological approach I was able to understand the concrete lived experiences of women principals. While in phenomenological studies analysis of data is an on-going process I tried to maintain the process as detailed below.

Analysing data

Data analysis is a process of unlocking information hidden in the raw data and transforming it in something useful and meaningful. Phenomenological analysis has something to do with meanings in contexts and emerging of themes from research participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. Data analysis was an on-going process using some of the guidelines by Hycner (1985); Stones (1988); Moustakas (1994); Williamson and Pollio (1999) and Giorgi (2004).

While the guidelines for analysis should not be taken as a rigid prescription of what was done, I tried to retain flexibility in this application, since the highlighted writers had more similarities than differences. Having written the descriptions of the women principals' lived experience I produced a detailed script of each conversation that included verbal and non-verbal cues as well as the actual context of the conversations. This was the initial stage and the critical aspect of my analysis phase. If I had used a tape recorder this phase of analysis would have been the equivalent of the transcription stage (Hycner 1985).

Giorgi's (1985) procedure reminds us to identify meaning units, specifying their central themes and then articulating the structural coherence of those themes. The interview protocols were therefore reduced to Natural Meaning Units, which formed the basis of general and situated descriptions of the participant's experience of the phenomenon. As terminology can be misleading, let me take this opportunity to elaborate on the meaning of meaning units. A meaning unit is a statement made by a participant. After achieving a holistic sense of the protocol, I had to re-read it again with a more reflective attitude, in preparation for the next phase in accordance with Stone's guideline that the protocols should be:

... broken down into naturally occurring units – each conveying a particular meaning – which emerge spontaneously from the reading. Each unit, termed a Natural Meaning Unit (NMU), may be defined as 'a statement made by the subject which is self-definable and self-delimiting in the expression of a single, recognisable aspect of the subject's experience ... Each meaning unit exists in the context of the other inter-related meanings of the protocol so that, regardless of how clearly meanings are conceptually differentiated from each other, ... there is an inseparable relatedness of all these meaning units in their lived sense (Stones 1988:153).

The purpose of this phase is to articulate the central themes that characterise the respective unfolding scenes of each

protocol, and in the process the richness of the data is exposed for further explication.

Transcript analysis

The data were analysed by reading and re-reading the text in depth, to search for patterns in the participant's experiences regarding their leadership. Each analysis consisted of examining the descriptions until patterns of women's leadership experience could be discerned. After each individual experience had been analysed, all individual experiences were examined to ascertain the essence of the women's lived experiences as educational leaders.

Obtaining a sense of the whole

Before further analysis was conducted, it was important to read the transcript in order to get a sense of the entire interview within the context. I read each interview three or four times before proceeding further with analysis.

Identifying meaning units

This step consisted of identifying meaning units by re-reading the interview transcript and identifying experienced shifts in meaning. Each shift in meaning was marked by underlining the transcribed manuscript. At this point, meaning units were examined for relevance to the investigation of women's leadership experience. Irrelevant meaning units were discarded, as were some of the redundant meaning units that could be identified at this point. Each meaning unit was grammatically rephrased.

An important element of the analysis was to understand the temporal sequence of the events described in the interview, as suggested by Wertz (in Moustakas 1994). Since an interview does not typically proceed along a linear thought process, it was important to organise the interview data within a logical and contextual relationship. Meaning units were placed into a first-person narrative allowing the women to engage in retelling of their leadership experience.

Articulating the Meaning Units

This step consisted of translating the participant's naïve (that is unanalysed) descriptions of their experience into psychologically relevant meanings bearing on their experience as women educational leaders. Thus the participant responses were examined with the intent of understanding expressed and implied meanings. These meanings were put into terminology that expressed the meanings in more direct psychological language. This process consisted of moving back and forth from data to meanings. Derived meanings were, in essence, tested against the raw interview data to determine whether they were supported by data. This movement from concrete data to abstraction of meaning produced the articulated meanings.

The situated meaning structure

From the articulated meaning units arrived at through step five the derived meanings were integrated in a third-person narrative retelling of the events expressed in more psychologically explicit language. The result was a meaningful description of the experience of women principals as educational leaders. The term situated refers to meaning derived from the context of a specific situation or experience.

The essence of experience

A final step in the individual analyses of the transcribed interviews consisted of refining the description into its most distilled and concise form. This was accomplished in the form of questions like, "what is essential for this experience of women primary school principals"? Finally a composite summary with a global meaning was produced through the use of hermeneutic interpretation.

Hermeneutics

The hermeneutics circle refers to an interpretive procedure in which there is a continuous process of relating a part of the text to the whole of the text (Pollio *et al.* 1997). Interpretation according to Moustakas (1994), is the basic structure o

experience, which unmasks what is hidden. Hermeneutics involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning is understood (Moustakas 1994).

While the text or interview protocol provides an important description of conscious experience, Gadamer, (1976: xviii) suggested that there is need for a reflective interpretation of the text in order to "achieve a fuller and more meaningful understanding". Reflective interpretation includes not only the description of the experience as it appears in consciousness, but also an analysis of the underlying conditions, historically and aesthetically, that account for the experience. Van der Mescht (1996:44) acknowledges that

the role of reflective experience has significant implications for the researcher. Since the researcher is essentially investigating the meaning, which the individual makes of his or her world, it goes without saying that the individual's schemata will themselves become the focus of such investigation.

Van der Mescht seems to highlight that there is a paradox. This is so possibly because reflective experience is open to measurement. However, any conscious act, according to Spinelli (1989) falls under the scrutiny of phenomenological investigation.

In hermeneutic circles the third stage involves broadening the whole interpretation to include all interviews on the same topic. Hermeneutic interpretation "involves an on-going attempt to relate parts of the text to its overall meaning" (Williamson and Pollio 1999:206). This process is important in that it improves the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon as experienced in different contexts. Each interview was interpreted in the context of all the others, and the rationale for doing that was not to establish generalisability, rather it was to improve the researcher's

interpretive vision (Pollio *et al.* 1997). These themes were described as experiential patterns exhibited in diverse situations. Since themes describe experiential commonalities, a thematic structure was only modified when an experiential uniqueness emerges in a specific protocol. Thematic interpretation is a continuous process of going back and forth among various parts of the text in which earlier and later parts are continuously being re-thematized.

The next stage was to produce a summary of each research participant, incorporating the themes that would have been elicited from the data. To be able to write this summary I revisited the initial detailed script of each conversation (the first phase in the analysis) as suggested by Giorgi (2003:8). Using this summary and themes I then revisit the women principals to cross check whether I had accurately and fully captured the essence of their experience. With the data emerging from the follow-up visit I was able to modify and/or add themes if necessary. This was followed by the stage of identifying themes common to all and those that were unique to each research participant, in preparation of conceptualisation of those themes.

LIMITATIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGY-THE PERCEIVED LIMITATIONS HAVE BECOME ITS STRENGTH

I am aware of possible limitations that could be encountered in my study. For instance women school principals, in describing their lived experiences, might have adopted a critical voice in presenting their situations. Phenomenology however does not go beyond interpretation, and therefore it does not become emancipatory. Campbell (2004) believed that phenomenology does offer ways of understanding not offered by other research methodologies. By describing their lived experiences, women might uncover issues, which call for further researches. Instead of being a limitation, the experience could be part of the study's strength as this means more avenues for further research will have been opened.

In the process of developing the research design I tried to consider and anticipate the kinds of arguments that would lend credibility to the study as well as the kinds of arguments that might be used to attack the findings. With both purposive and snowball sampling I managed to capture data, which later, were analysed and with the use of phenomenology central themes as well as common themes were identified and those that were unique to each research participant highlighted as well.

Most people are concerned with the issue of validity. I was also aware of validity threats that might impact negatively on the quality of the research. In the case of this study, the question of triangulation was one of the validity threats. Hycner (1985) suggests that a member check be practised, that is cross checking the data collected with the participant to make sure data have been accurately captured. On the same note, for purposes of phenomenological interpretation, Pollio *et al.* (1997:53) indicate that:

The criterion of validity becomes whether a reader, adopting the world view articulated by the researcher, would be able to see textual evidence supporting the interpretation, and whether the goal of providing a first-person understanding was attained ... validity is placed in the human practice, where absolute certainty is not a requirement

ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE STUDY

In order to proceed into the field of research, I had to get permission from the Ministry of Education and the Mashonaland East Regional Office of Education. Neuman (1997) suggests that a researcher should seek clearance to conduct research from competent authorities. Getting permission is only a step; it is not a guarantee that one can simply proceed with interviews. I still had to get the agreement

of women principals to participate in the study. I proceeded in each case to get the principals' informed consent before carrying out conversations with them.

Before starting on the conversations I had to reassure them on matters concerning privacy, confidentiality and that the results of the study will be reported in a way that guarantees anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in place of the individuals' names. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

HOW PHENOMENOLOGY TENDS TO BE A THEORY AND A METHOD

For phenomenology, theory arises out of the process of inquiry (Greenfield and Ribbins 1993:17). That is to say theory should emerge on its own in the process of research. How this happens approximates what goes on with grounded theory. In grounded research, theory is also generated during the research process from data being collected. In grounded theory researchers also recognise the importance of context and social structure (Moustakas 1994:4). However, the uniqueness of phenomenological approach is in its goal – to attain a first-person description of a specified domain of experience, such as in this study, the lived experiences of women educational leaders. The type of this enquiry is dialogical in that questions flow from the dialogue as it unfolds, unlike the naturalist approach in which questions are determined in advance. Let me describe how the research experience generated theory in my research.

When the participants in this study were describing their lived experiences Enita in her threatening school environment with bullying children, Shelly in her dysfunctional school with an un-supportive community just like Linda's, their descriptions of how they handled the challenges reflect their perspectives of leadership. This is how as a phenomenologist the research

lived experiences yielded interpretable data that reflect the participant's perspective on her experience as it emerges in the context of the interview. And that tends to be how theory is developed out of the enquiry. This approach seems to have worked well for me in this study. As Greenfield and Ribbins (1993:12) pointed out:

From the phenomenological perspective research, theory and methodology must be closely associated. Theory must arise out of the process of inquiry itself and be intimately connected with data under investigation.

It is important to note that phenomenological reality is in the context of the social and natural world and, interpretations of the subjective meanings that individuals place upon their actions (Greenfield and Ribbins 1993). The sets of meaning which people make sense of their world and action therefore, reflect their perspective, and hence the uniqueness and importance of a phenomenological focus, which is my next attempt - to distinguish a phenomenological approach from other interpretive orientations and reflect on its uniqueness, and in the process, reveal the strengths and limitations and challenges.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While validity from other approaches is sought by triangulation, phenomenology requires rigour. From this perspective validity is not determined by the degree of correspondence between description and reality. For the purposes of phenomenological interpretation, it is the textual evidence supporting the interpretation, and the goal of providing first-person understanding that should be attained. In phenomenology Van der Mescht (2004:2) observed that "its methodological practice is perhaps most clearly articulated in Giorgi's work. In this regard I delight myself in relating to his work. Giorgi (1971:11) contends that: "it is phenomenologically unsound to establish a method that must be used that is prior

to and independent of the phenomenon to be investigated". This suggests that when approaching the field of research there should be no prior theory that determines the research. Since I indicated before that I would distinguish a phenomenological approach from other qualitative approaches such as grounded theory and ethnographic research, as they share some of the features it seems appropriate at this stage to make such distinction.

Drawing on Van Rensburg (2001:16) on the above point, grounded theory has been adopted by many interpretivist researchers who did not wish to formulate theory in advance but to let the theory emerge from data, a feature which characterises phenomenology. Such kind of relatedness may cause confusion this is why it is important to clarify. While there can be more such features such as recognition of context and a focus on reality that assimilate the theory, what clearly distinguishes phenomenology from other interpretive theories is:

An insistence on description, rather than interpretation while the line between these – descriptions and interpretation – is thin and perhaps contestable, the drive to stay with description until a holistic picture of the issue emerges is fundamental to phenomenological research. It embraces the notion of bracketing elaborated early in this article, (perhaps unattainable in its purist form) and works against the tendency to make early judgements calls based on pre-conceived notions (Van der Mescht 2004:3).

From Van der Mescht's distinction, it should be clear what makes unique a phenomenological approach from other interpretive qualitative researches.

In seeking to understand the women's experiences as educational leaders in previously male contexts, and with Giorgi's conception in mind, I engaged myself in on-going

dialogue with the participants. I tried to accept as relevant and real whatever was dialectically disclosed. The challenge of *epoché* is to be transparent to ourselves, in order to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose, so that we may see in a naïve and completely open manner (Moustakas 1994:86.) I therefore tried to embrace life as described by the women in my study. While the operative word in phenomenological research is to 'describe' (Giorgi 1986), as a phenomenologist researcher I was aware that my aim is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon as it appears, rather than indulging myself in attempts to explain - within a pre-given framework.

In phenomenology, the type of inquiry (how rigorous it is) determines the richness of the study. A phenomenological interview is a *procedure* for accessing *rigorous* and *significant descriptions* of everyday human experience as it is lived, and described by the individual in specific contexts. The uniqueness of such dialogue is that it does not only allow the participant to describe experience, it also requires her to clarify its meaning to "an involved other" (Pollio *et al.* 1997:28). As the women described their experiences of being school heads, because of the interactive nature of the interviews, I was able to probe on their experiences -to reach and grasp the essences of their stories.

Data produced through qualitative interviews can be chaotic. To deal with such volumes of data one requires some form of interpretive framework. In phenomenological research methods while the primacy is on *Verstehen* in seeking to describe phenomenon from the perspective of the participants in the study, the problem remains how the interpreter is able to adopt the perspective or to relive the experience of the other (Valle and Halling 1989). It was also a difficult step for me as a researcher.

To re-live or to understand the world as it is experienced by another as suggested above, requires a level of critical

distance (*bracketing*)/*epoché* elaborated before) in which the researcher steps back to reflect on the phenomenon. This has been one of my biggest challenges in the process of interpretation. For the purposes of existential-phenomenological interpretation, *bracketing* is better described positively, as a way of seeing (Pollio *et al.* 1997:48). Rather than suspending world knowledge, the interpreter applies a worldly view such that a phenomenological understanding may emerge. Since bracketing is an on-going process of suspending the natural attitude, after much effort I remained with essential rules of consciousness. This process led me back to the things themselves such that I was able to uncover the nature and meanings of each experience as the life-worlds of the participants emerged in clarity. I therefore engaged myself in the reflective phase targeted towards meaning – imagining senses, thus entering into the imaginative variations.

As evidenced by this study, the final product of an experiential phenomenological interpretation is the description of experiential patterns and interrelationships among themes. In achieving a thematic description, the researcher does not attempt to draw themes on the basis of formal abstract principles but rather to capture what the experience was like for the participant, "*what it really meant to that person in the particular situation*" being discussed Pollio *et al.* (1997:52).

Talking about issues of validity, I would like to stress that evidential support could be evaluated in two ways. The first is methodological - that means it focuses on *rigour* and the *appropriateness* for yielding the type of understanding claimed by the study. The second is experiential – this focuses on whether interpretations provide insights into the reader. To be more specific, methodological concerns focus on the procedural structure of the research whereas experiential focus more on the "meaning and significance of the interpretive results" (Pollio *et al.* 1997:55). For a

phenomenological validity both methodological and experiential concerns are important. The study reflects unique features of phenomenology. Grant (2005:187) in her study also acknowledged the uniqueness of phenomenological approach which is its focus on the "individual's unique interpretations" of her "lived world".

Phenomenology does not have a critical dimension, per se that is, it does not seek to emancipate or empower the research participants or the wider professional community. However, a phenomenological enquiry has the potential to *unveil power relations that are normally concealed*. Interpretivist researchers from a phenomenological orientation are not interested in taking action through or even after research; their focus is on unravelling the complexities of social life as they appear and as the research participants experience it (Van Rensburg 2001:21).

Concluding Remarks

The fact that the study was conducted with only a small sample suggests that it is not possible to generalise the findings as applicable to the whole population in the field of education. The opposite becomes its strength. In empirical phenomenology claims can never be true for more than the case, or situation (Van der Mescht 2004:2). Phenomenology focuses on the uniqueness of the individual and not the shared. Spinelli (1989:14) argued that phenomenologists' emphases are on the "the unsharable variables in experience". The lack of generalisability that could be seen as a limitation in phenomenology can therefore be regarded as its strength. Drawing on the women's experiences regarding the issue of uniqueness, some of the cases though similar, how the women lived according to the descriptions were different and unique.

In qualitative research the number of participants tends to be either too small or too large: too small to make statistical generalizations if this is intended, and too large to make

penetrating' interpretations. The number of participants necessarily depends upon the purpose of the study. If the purpose is to understand the world as experienced by one specific person, this one subject is sufficient. To the common question "How many interview subjects do I need?" the answer is simply "Interview so many subjects that you find out what you need to know."

In recent approaches to the social sciences the quest for universal generalizations is being replaced by an emphasis on the contextuality of knowledge. In a phenomenological study such as mine, the researcher is interested in the uniqueness of each case. The questions of how representative and generalisability the data are become non-issues. The primary responsibility of an inquirer is one of providing sufficient description of the particular context studied so that others may adequately judge the applicability or fit of the findings to their own context. This I believe is what my study discussed in this paper managed to do.

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