

# Applying phenomenology: Utilising ‘point of view’ as an avenue to reconcile philosophy with social research

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## ABSTRACT

This paper identifies the philosophical challenge in considering the use of phenomenology in social research particularly in terms of how its philosophical grounding is understood, contextualised and applied in empirical, qualitative methodological design. In so doing, it offers a practical approach for qualitative researchers to tackle phenomenology’s philosophical conundrums and still apply some of its outstanding features for social research. This conundrum, as will be further discussed in the following sections, relates to the way in which the subjective self perceives the objective world. This paper will first discuss what I consider to be one of phenomenology’s complex disjuncture which shows up by dint of how its philosophy locates the point-of-view stance of the individual especially in the way the ‘viewer’ (the subject) is understood to be located in an objective world. Following this, the methodological development of phenomenology will be discussed in order to show up the evolution of this philosophical school of thought. It is via this evolution that has made it possible for its philosophical strength to be applied as a methodological framework for social research. However, in much of qualitative research that utilises phenomenology as its underpinning methodological framework, starkly missing is the researcher’s negotiation of how the philosophical conundrum (in relation to how the subjective self-views the objective world) plays itself out in the methodological application. It can sometimes appear that the philosophical conundrum has been conveniently bypassed and that whatever succeeding methodological application that is used, is assumed to be detached, even disconnected from its originating philosophy. Particularly, this refers to how a researcher should declare their biographical/ontological stance in relation to their research participants who are presumed to be located in the so-called objective world. Thus, in the final portion of this paper, I will provide a framework which I term the Analytical Guiding Frame (AGF) and Overall Guiding Frame (OFG) (Chong, 2019a, 2019b) as a means to draw out conversations about the disjuncture and resolution.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Phenomenography, Analytical Guiding Frame, Overall Guiding Frame

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### Philosophical background and disjuncture

Any discussion about phenomenology will need an introductory section that lays out its definitions. The reason for this is because of both the breadth and depth of how the notion of phenomenology has developed and changed. Existing largely within the field of philosophy but found also in the scientific field of physics and thermodynamics, the word ‘phenomenology’ is at least understood to be about human phenomenon in the former, and the phenomenon of matter, in the latter.

Phenomenology, in how it came to be, is by and large considered as a philosophical endeavour. As a philosophy, phenomenology mainly took form through philosopher and mathematician, Edmund Husserl's lectures, writings, correspondences and discussions at the end of the 19th century and into early 20th century, on the philosophy of human consciousness. Husserl based his work on Brentano's (1874/1973) philosophical discussions on what he would refer to as the 'intentionality' of human experience. The 'intentionality' of human experience is seen as an exercise in the objectification of an individual's experience so that the individual may see and apprehend the experience anew.

Living in a time when empirical, positivistic scientific research had been powerfully and inextricably intertwined with mainstream European thought, Husserl's (1931b) philosophical take concerning human consciousness seen especially in binary terms of subject-object (i.e. the one who sees vs the thing that is seen) was located firmly within the structures of empirical science. Thus, phenomenology is best known to be based on Husserl's (1931b) philosophy which advocates phenomenology as the scientific and structural study of a phenomenon. Particularly, phenomenology is the study of how we experience the world we live in. Hence, the notion of lived experience in our life worlds is central to its study.

At this juncture, it is important to qualify in practical terms, what phenomenology attempts to undertake. As phenomenology is about the study of human experience, this idea bears heavily upon the ontological question of how that experience is actually being experienced. For example, if an individual experiences anger, is anger the phenomenon or is the descriptive feeling of anger the phenomenon? How does this alter the ontology of the experience if, for example, we included one's experience of anger as being coloured by one's sociocultural influence? Can an individual get to the experience of anger, whilst angry, or is it only possibly identifiable after the fact? Indeed, it is hard to imagine how any one person can be made aware of anger without it implicating their conscious perception of the phenomenon.

Early phenomenologists argue that an experience is in essence its own phenomenon. This would mean that for example, a phenomenological investigation of an individual's anger will reveal not his or her perception of anger but the actual essence of anger. In doing so, phenomenological investigations strive towards getting to the heart of lived experience. Despite Husserl's development of his brand of phenomenology undergoing important changes as he moved from Logical Investigations to Ideas and Cartesian Meditations, his treatment of human experience vis-à-vis its consciousness was largely treated as though it (the experience) could be mathematically divided and analysed according to whether the object of the phenomenon was 'real' enough to be identified. Key to this analysis was the location of the conscious 'point of view'. This means that the phenomenon that is experienced is related to how it is located and to whom the perspective belongs. Yet, here is where the disjuncture, which will be further discussed, lies.

To begin with, scholars who discuss phenomenology are faced with complex and differing understandings of what phenomenology actually means. The disparity is said to have come from the different philosophers who went on to develop the Brentano/Husserlian concepts of intentionality and essence of experience (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, 1962/1989) and from differing traditions of reading and understanding philosophy in Europe and North America (Crotty, 1998). Ricouer et al. (1974) posit that there are three branches of phenomenology of which only one hails from Husserl's school of thought. The philosophical arguments that swirl around the different schools of phenomenology are too many to delineate. Also, it is not the intention of this paper that the differences, whether they be "orthodox or heretical" (Ricouer et al., 1974, p. 149) be scrutinised. However, this paper intends to utilise and re-align a particularly troublesome feature of phenomenology from lifting it out of its philosophical conundrum and applying it into its methodological space. This troublesome feature I am referring to is 'point of view'.

As mentioned in the earlier paragraph, there is a disjuncture in how a phenomenon is considered especially in terms of point of view. One important difference in Husserlian and non-Husserlian thought is how the basis of early phenomenology in the Brentano/Husserlian sense was objectivist in its epistemological sense while the later developed idea of phenomenology was subjectivist. Husserl advocated strongly that human experience can essentially be studied scientifically. This he did, largely through an almost sterile, structured, inward-looking scrutiny of an individual's lived experience. Again, when locating Husserl in the early 20th century, it makes sense that the objectivist perspective reigned supreme because the influence of positivist thinking from the field of natural science research would have required such treatment.

Phenomenology as a purely philosophical endeavour insists that the point of view should be stripped even of its 'taken-for-granted' notions so that the object of the intention in its purest essence can be reached (Husserl, 1931b). Where it is irreconcilable is the tension that arises out of the question of how any human experience can be essentialised and extracted to the extent of it being detached from the individual who is at one and the same time, doing the experiencing. The seemingly paradoxical distancing of the self from the self is understood to be Husserl's (1931b) basis of what he refers to as a return to the essence of the actual phenomenon, stripped of any possible influence from conscious, coloured perspective.

Husserl believed that once the phenomenological reduction is exercised where preconceptions especially shaped by culturally and socially-biased lenses are stripped away, the essence of the actual experience unclouded by external influence, will emerge.

Therefore, in the purist sense, there can be no other point of view except the one as seen by the individual. This is because strictly speaking, "phenomenology...is a first-person exercise. Each of us must explore our own experience, not the experience of others..." (Crotty, 1998, p. 84). The centrality of the preceding sentence is in the phrase "our own experience" because it points to there being no medium between the self and the experience. While this is ontologically possible when an individual is or exists in real, physical time, it becomes problematic when that event is considered retrospectively.

Thus, if the fundamentals of phenomenology are undeniably located on a potentially solipsistic slope, how will this be applied as a methodological framework? This is the question that needs a resolution.

### **Methodological application**

Phenomenology as a research methodology in fields where human behaviour, drive and motivation are central tenets to be studied, began to take root in the latter half of the 20th century. Importantly, the phenomenological research methodology is able to "provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the (human) experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Many of the principles of phenomenology have been applied by scholars like Schutz (1967) and Giorgi (1985a) amongst others, so as to be developed into phenomenological research methodology.

As a research methodology, the phenomenological perspective provides both philosophical and practical structures for qualitative researchers to apply into their study of human experience. Particularly, the sharp focus that is given to lived experience as lived and understood through the lenses of a group of people provided a powerful structure through which the otherwise fluid human experience would not be captured nor analysed. Thus, phenomenology as a methodology has been applied in fields like psychology, education, nursing, and organizational behaviour. As a result, phenomenology as a methodology can be considered to be differentiated from phenomenology as a philosophy by the way the former can be applied through a second person point-of-view (researcher's interpretation of participant's experience) while the latter is applied through a first person point-of-view (philosopher's interpretation of own experience).

While key precepts of phenomenology are critical in scrutinising the complexities of human experience, phenomenologists from a purist perspective have found it challenging to apply all of its precepts to empirical research (Giorgi, 1985b). For example, in social research contexts, where accounts of the target participants' experience are often formed through retrospection, phenomenological researchers are encouraged to adopt the "phenomenological attitude" which is to bracket off their own and even find ways to bracket off the participants' pre-conceived notions so that the participants' accounts are as much as possible, essentially pure (Husserl, 1931). However, phenomenological researchers often acknowledge that the bracketing process is in itself problematic because they (the researchers and the participants) are essentially imprisoned within their own consciousness and such a process could bring about solipsism (Giorgi, 1985b; Schutz, 1967).

Among phenomenology researchers, the divide is clear with those who adopt the Husserlian stance advocating for the possibility of exercising complete bracketing and the others who adopt the Heideggerian view that advocates for the researcher's subjectivity in interpreting their lifeworlds. Tufford and Newman argue that qualitative researchers should abide by both the Husserlian and Heideggerian perspectives to exercise bracketing in the researcher and the researched (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

As mentioned in the preceding section, if there should be a problem, it lay in the lack of discussion that can explain how the existential and ontological conundrum can be reconciled before phenomenology can be regarded as a methodological underpinning. In order to rationalise the conundrum of which point of view to consider, the following is a proposal that traces the development of some important facets of phenomenology as a philosophy into a methodology so as to provide a platform upon which to reconsider the role of the point-of-view.

As a philosophical endeavour, the first-person point of view is a necessary position to take because it is introspective to the extent that it requires ontological questions to be asked. Ontological questions like “How am I experiencing this?” or “How am I able to see this?” will trigger deeper, transcendental interpretations of reality. Often referred to as transcendental phenomenology, the Brentano/Husserl/Merleau-Ponty delineation of human experience is argued to be scientifically understood, with the phenomenon being objectified.

Philosophers use the mental bracketing of the consciousness or the epoche in order to arrive at the noema (the thought) and the noesis or the thinking. The phenomenological reduction is then exercised so as to pare down the irrelevant structures of the phenomenon to arrive at its essence.

As I have pointed out at the start of this paper, the philosophical conundrum that sometimes hinders the phenomenological researcher from reconciling phenomenology as a philosophy as opposed to a methodology lies in the way the researcher grapples with whether he or she should be located within the first-person (interpretation of own perceptions of lived experience) or the second-person position (interpretation of own and others' perceptions of lived experience). Due to what appears to be irreconcilable differences that are fundamental to the philosophy/methodology divide, there is a need for me to propose a bridging of some measure in order to justify how both first- and second-person perspectives can be adopted. My proposal is offered in the form of a two-part framework which I term as “Point-of-view framework for phenomenology as philosophy and methodology”.

This framework is premised upon the argument that both points-of-view can be adopted by the phenomenology methodologist in order to capitalise on the strength of this approach. As depicted in Figure 1, phenomenology when analysed vis-à-vis its historical development can be utilised as a rationale for underscoring the practical application of its philosophy and methodology. It is important to note that the illustration in Figure 1 is based upon how phenomenology has developed as a philosophy (seen in the top half) and as a methodology (seen in the bottom half). In a corollary fashion, this framework also takes into consideration the research methods of the research.

Within this framework, the researcher can begin by locating the self within the first-person perspective because this is amenable to its philosophical grounding. As seen in the top half of Figure 1, phenomenology when regarded as a kind of philosophy can be reconciled from a first-person point of view because there is some ontological leeway to attempt self-bracketing. This is seen through how one can use imaginative variation to locate the self in a newly imagined position so as to see the phenomenon anew. By ‘imaginative variation’, I am referring to Husserl’s (1931a) theoretical argument for the philosopher/researcher to mentally step outside of one’s taken-for-granted filters so as to think about the phenomenon differently.

Although this could potentially be thought of as a contaminating factor towards a research design, the ontological, phenomenological argument can be used to dispute this claim. For example, in analysing the phenomenon of anger, one could imagine oneself as being raised differently and if that would impact the way they thought about anger. Because this is located with the self and is seen from the first-person point of view, it is therefore possible to argue that this exercise of self-scrutiny can be a useful platform for self-reflection and self-reflexion. This means that within any qualitative research design, especially one that is underpinned by phenomenologically-bound principles, the researcher’s own scrutiny of the phenomenon being researched requires attention. The researcher could apply mental bracketing upon the self and proceed to ask ontological questions. Some useful questions are:

- What are my assumptions about ontology (being)?
- How am I, as a researcher, located within this research?
- What lenses do I bring to bear within this research?
- If I imagined myself to be of a different background, how would I see this phenomenon differently?

- What do I think I know about this phenomenon?
- If I put my assumptions aside, what would surprise me about this phenomenon?

However, it must still be acknowledged that there is only a limited amount of self-questioning that can be carried out before the charge of solipsism appears. In the case of the questions above, they are asked in the intersubjective sense which assumes the possibility of a transcendental self in relation to transcendental others (Hutcheson, 1981). Thus, the Brentano/Husserl/Merleau-Ponty design of descriptive phenomenological analysis with its focus on bracketing/epoche and noema/noesis can be applied to the ontological lens of the researcher.

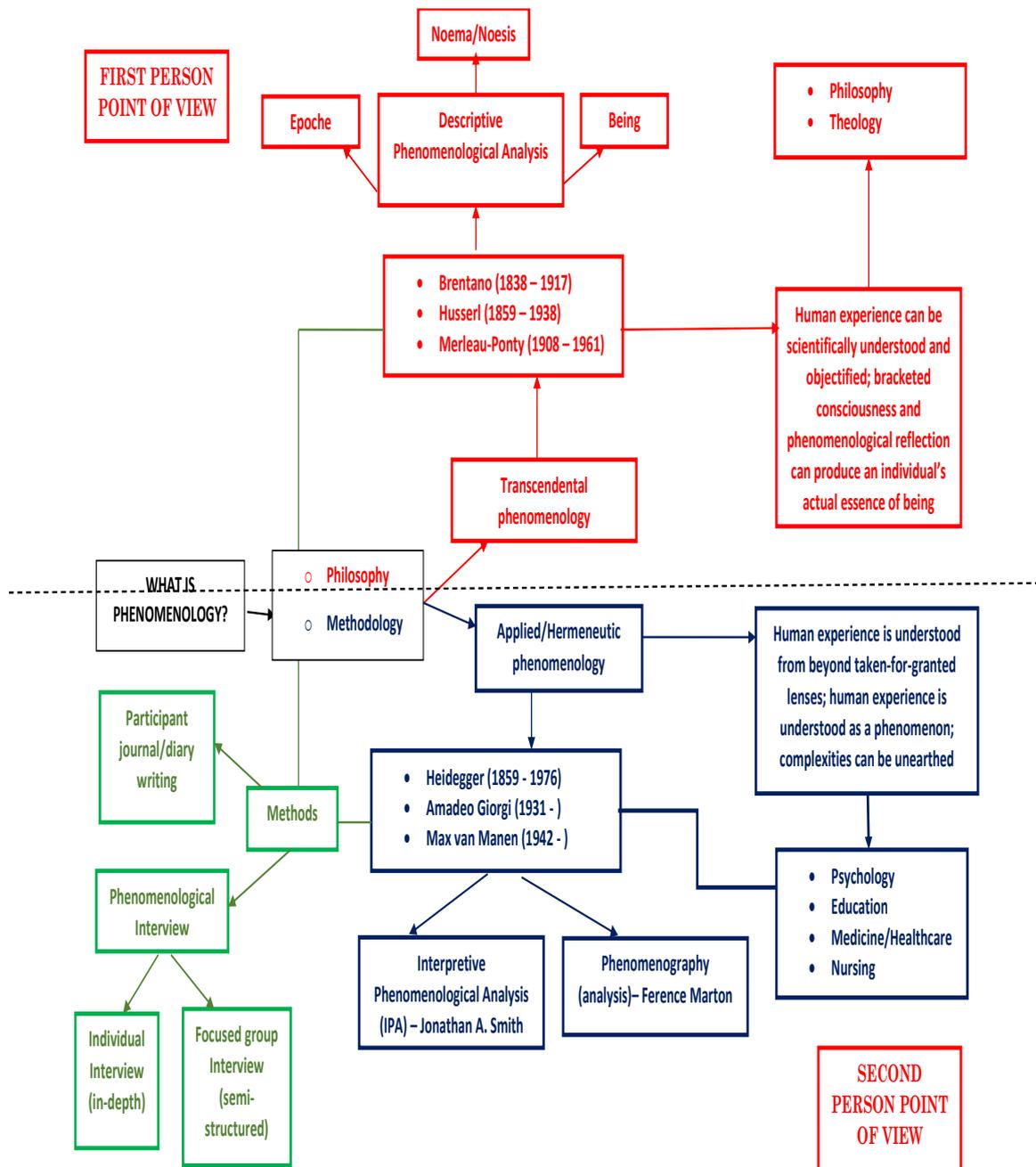


Figure 1: Point-of-view framework for phenomenology as philosophy and methodology

As for the second-person point of view, its locale is applicable in the methodological standing of the framework. As illustrated in the bottom half of Figure 1, the development of phenomenology is seen vis-à-vis its movement as a research methodology. The possibility of this philosophy to have developed into a research methodology would have been much aided by the mid- to late-20th century progress of qualitative research methodology which opened up new space for social scientific research that sought to understand human experience.

Particularly, the human mind became the next new frontier that required professional analyses. With this, the philosophical underpinning of phenomenology found its way into 20th century psychology and later, social psychology from which much of empirical research within social science drew its research methods. Interestingly, phenomenological interviews (in-depth), diary-writing and observations which were linked to the world of psychology and psychoanalysis became legitimate research methods for social sciences.

What these research methods did was help draw out the descriptions of individuals' lived experience of the phenomenon being investigated. As can be seen in Figure 1, these methods are most commonly linked with the applied perspective of phenomenology. Within the application of phenomenology, the researcher is positioned as the second point-of-view and will need to interpret the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. Without having to ontologically bracket the self or the participant in its purest sense, the researcher can still exercise a critical perspective upon the phenomenon under investigation by approaching the phenomenon with multi-faceted questions.

Thus, it is fair to consider that the methodological aspect of phenomenology chimes with applied or hermeneutic phenomenology which was led by Heidegger (1962). Although a student of Husserl, Heidegger moved away from the extreme perspective of the objectivist stance to include a potentially possible second-person point of view. In this second-person point of view, the exercise of self-bracketing or epoche will not be applied in its purest sense as the second-person point of view will require the interpretation of others' lived experience. Others like Giorgi (1985b) and van Manen (2015) took on the applied methodology and exercised it in their respective fields of research. van Manen (2015) for example applies hermeneutic phenomenology within the field of pedagogy. From here, other applications of phenomenological methodology brought about new 'schools' among which are phenomenography and Interpretive Phenomenological analysis (IPA).

In the field of education but not limited to it, phenomenography was the answer to applied phenomenology where the second-person point of view is valued (Marton, 1981, 1988). An example drawn from the field of education can be found in deep learning. The idea of deep learning was investigated using phenomenographic research design.

Likewise, IPA emerged in the field of health science and provided an avenue for researchers to appreciate how patients and doctors experienced the management of health, sickness and other corollary issues related to the human care system (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 1999).

Using the approaches of IPA as an example, we can see how Smith et al. (1999, pp. 59-60) built upon patients' lived experience of renal dialysis by asking questions about the phenomenon in terms of the physical, psychological and emotional aspects of confronting their illness via the following critical questions:

- Could you give me a brief history of your kidney problem from when it started to your beginning dialysis?
- Could you describe what happens in dialysis, in your own words?
- How would you describe yourself as a person?
- What does the term 'illness' mean to you? How do you define it?

Both phenomenography and IPA value the intersubjective, second person point of view and utilises research methods like observations, diary writing and in-depth interviews. In time, both phenomenography and IPA have been applied across different fields of studies.

Throughout this paper, I have outlined how we can apply phenomenology as a methodology by utilising the notion of ‘point-of-view’ as an avenue to reconcile philosophy with social research. However, in doing this, it must be noted that the exercise requires an iterative and discursive shift in thinking that must chime with the research design. In order to practice this, I propose the use of the Analytic Guiding Frame (AGF) and the Overall Guiding Frame (OGF) as a platform to bridge the crossing-over.

### **Applying the Analytic Guiding Frame (AGF) and Overall Guiding Frame (OGF)**

In the preceding sections, I argue that reconciling one’s ontological and methodological ‘point of view’ is integral to fully applying phenomenology as a methodology in social science research. Much of this reconciling is anticipated to occur in the analytical stage of a research. However, this reconciliation is not something that just ‘happens in the head’. In keeping with the practice of detailing the audit trail of qualitatively-designed research, a platform upon which philosophical arguments are made so that epistemological changes are negotiated is needed.

In a previous paper, I posited that qualitative researchers often find it a challenge to detail their reflexive decisions because the exercise cannot be done on an ad hoc manner (Chong, 2019a). This is more problematic when qualitative researchers seek out ready-made analytical steps to follow which may result in the cyclical way that research design and findings become repetitive and entrenched. This goes against the grain of qualitative research which should fundamentally be open to the Kuhnian sense of paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1996).

In the previous paper, I proposed a practical, systematic 4-step analytic approach that applies a 2-part framework as a platform upon which the researcher’s iterative thoughts can be explored. Although details of how this framework is created can be found in Chong (2019a) and how it can be applied can be accessed in Chong (2019b), in this paper, I will highlight three aspects of the framework that can be useful to draw out the conversations about the disjuncture and resolution of phenomenology.

Before going further, it is important at this juncture to provide my definition for the AGF and OFG. “The Analytical Guiding Frame (AGF) provides the technical and therefore analytical framework which guides how raw data from the research can be unpacked and analysed” (Chong, 2019a, p. 301) while “The three elements that form the Overall Guiding Frame (OGF) are the research objective, research questions and the researcher’s ontological position” (Chong, 2019a, p. 302). Although both frames are connected, they are differentiated by the positionality of the researcher in relation to the self and the research. Thus, this difference between the two frames is located within a shifting ‘point of view’.

The AGF and OGF can be used as a platform upon which the negotiations across the philosophy and methodology of phenomenology can be performed (Chong, 2019a, 2019b). These frames account for both the philosophical (epistemological and ontological) and methodological (methods and fieldwork) discussions for how decisions and perspectives shift and why they do. In terms of the philosophical perspective of phenomenology where first person point of view is located, the OGF becomes a practical platform upon which reflexive questions can be put forward such that the researcher is able to reconcile their ontological position with the epistemological questions of their research.

This connection is important to have as it forms the fundamental, philosophical positioning of any study. As reflexive questions about the researcher’s point of view in relation to the subject-object connection are raised and as epoche/bracketing is exercised, the researcher can link their ontological position with the research questions and objectives. This is in line with precepts of qualitative research in terms of how the qualitative researcher must delineate their position.

Where the second person point of view is located, the AGF serves as a practical platform upon which interpretivist and iterative questions are raised so that methodological and analytical processes can be applied to the data. In this case, the researcher exercises the second person point of view as they account for their participants’ explanations of their lived experience. Here, the researcher will be guided by how the data informs the analysis and in a cyclical manner, how the analysis will go on to further shape the on-going fieldwork. Where justified, methodological and analytical shifts can occur on this platform.

Therefore, from combining both the first person and second person points of view within a phenomenologically based research using the AGF/OFG platform, this paper suggests that the philosophical conundrum can be reconciled and in fact, optimised so that the depth of such qualitative research be explored. The more that the researcher is encouraged to be both reflexive and critical, the sharper will be the outcomes of the study.

### Concluding remarks

Almost a century after its establishment, the benefit of the continued development of phenomenology from a philosophical pursuit into a methodological application is key to allowing social scientists to locate their empirical research within phenomenological research that pays homage to lived experience. Perhaps most importantly, an ontological contribution of the thinking behind phenomenology is the creation of the self-conscious (i.e. reflective) and self-consciously critical (i.e. reflexive) researcher.

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