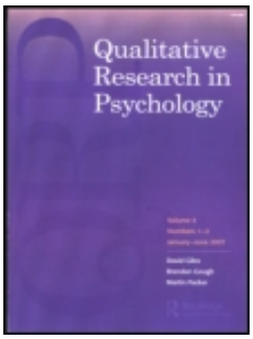

Qualitative Research in Psychology

ISSN: 1478-0887 (Print) 1478-0895 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/uqrp20

Validation in Qualitative Research: General Aspects and Specificities of the Descriptive Phenomenological Method

Daniel Sousa

To cite this article: Daniel Sousa (2014) Validation in Qualitative Research: General Aspects and Specificities of the Descriptive Phenomenological Method, Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11:2, 211-227, DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2013.853855

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.853855

Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11:211–227, 2014

ISSN: 1478-0887 print/1478-0895 online
DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2013.853855

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Validation in Qualitative Research: General Aspects and Specificities of the Descriptive Phenomenological Method

DANIEL SOUSA

ISPA - University Institute, Health and Clinical Psychology Research Unit, Lisboa, Portugal

The criteria for the validation of qualitative research are still open to discussion. This article has two aims: first, to present a summary of concepts, emerging from the field of qualitative research that present answers regarding issues of validation, reliability, and generalization; and second, to propose six concepts that allow the monitoring of the validation of phenomenological research within the context of qualitative research in psychology—intentionality, psychological phenomenological reduction, eidetic psychological analysis, syntheses of identification, phenomenon versus individual, and invariant structures. It is argued that there are general criteria that qualitative methods must meet, and specific methodological criteria to monitor the quality control. A final definition is proposed, to delimit the validation, reliability, and generalization of the phenomenological research results.

Keywords: criteria; descriptive method; generalization; phenomenology; qualitative research; reliability; validation

Introduction

The question of how valid knowledge is produced is as old as the history of ideas. Plato distinguished between *doxa* (opinions believed to be unstable and ephemeral, devoid of scientific grounding) and *episteme* (true knowledge, held to be grounded, credible and apodictic). The positivist epistemology of the natural sciences is still the dominant language used for explaining and predicting phenomena concerning the world and man. The procedures imply the application of the experimental method, with the aim of establishing cause-effect relations, that is, nexus of logical causality between phenomena, which should in turn enable the generalization of results and of universal laws. The model follows a realistic ontology, implying that reality is, by definition, objective and able to be explained through empirical facts. In this paradigm, knowing is quantifying (Sousa Santos 1987, p. 15). Qualitative research seeks to provide rich thorough descriptions and interpretations about the phenomena under study as they occur in their natural environment. The starting point is not a previously determined theory, but instead the conclusions are rather based upon on data and, therefore, inductive (Hill et al. 1997, p. 518). These approaches are exploratory rather than confirmatory, descriptive and comprehensive rather than explanatory, interpretative rather than nomothetic (Rennie et al. 2002, p. 179). The question of the

Correspondence: Dr. Daniel Sousa, ISPA - University Institute, Health and Clinical Psychology Research Unit, Rua Jardim do Tabaco, n° 34, Lisboa, Portugal. E-mail: daniel.sousa@ispa.pt

validation and quality of research, whether quantitative or qualitative, means taking into consideration the philosophy of science that frames it, that is, its conceptual roots, which for their part, include assumptions and beliefs that are ontological (i.e., concerned with reality and Being) and epistemological (theory of knowledge), and which provide a framework for the method (methodological procedures). This article subscribes to some contemporary positions expressed in the literature:

- The quality of the research can only be assessed with reference to the paradigm, epistemology and to the specific discipline framing it (Crotty 1998, p. 2; Giorgi 2002, p. 2; Morrow 2005, p. 251);
- Consequently, concepts such as validation, reliability, replication, objectivity, and generalization should be understood in the light of the epistemological and disciplinary framework underlying the research (Hill et al. 1997, p. 556; Morrow 2005, p. 251);
- The social and human sciences should consider epistemological and methodological pluralism when researching their study object, particularly when this concerns the meaning of human actions (Polkinghorne 1983, p. 5);
- A lack of rigour continues to exist in the development of qualitative research, and an excessive proliferation of methodologies (sometimes one researcher, one method), which can make it difficult to acquire scientific recognition and the accumulation of knowledge, encouraging the notion that the social and human sciences are somehow lagging behind their counterparts in the physical sciences (Sousa Santos 1987, p. 21; Hill et al. 1997, p. 518; Hill & Lambert 2004, p. 102);
- Qualitative research is adequate for the generation of valid scientific knowledge, although there is the need for clear criteria governing its monitoring, rigour, and quality assessment in order to avoid extreme positions such as undisciplined eclecticism and methodological orthodoxy (Henwood & Pidgeon 1992, p. 105; Hill et al. 1997, p. 519; Madill, Jordan & Shirley 2000, p. 2; Holloway & Todres 2003, p. 355); and
- One of the assumptions of the last point has to do with the fact that the results of a study may have valid and useful applications for people other than those that have directly participated in it, thus stressing the intersubjective, social, and ethical dimensions (Stiles 1993, p. 593).

As a consequence of the points listed above, this article has two aims. First, we will make explicit the criteria, discussed in the literature, for the validation and assessment of qualitative research. Second, and after some epistemological considerations, we will propose six dimensions to be used as criteria for monitoring descriptive phenomenological research's results. We believe that the criteria expressed in the first part of the text should be considered for all types of qualitative methodologies, although adapted to their specificities. For this reason, the second part of the text has two objectives: to demonstrate how qualitative methods should consider essential criteria for quality control that should always be present in any qualitative method (first part of the article) and, using the example of the descriptive phenomenological method, to explicit criteria that a specific qualitative approach should consider in order to regulate and monitor the research process (second part of the article).

The central argument is: there are of consistency and validity criteria common to all qualitative methods, and there is a need to create mechanisms to control specific methodological quality, depending on the method used. This second point linked to the first, is even more important when given that we know it is not enough to say that a phenomenological method was used. There are different researchers applying different phenomenological

methodologies (Yardley 2000, p. 217). There is an inherent tension between the acceptance of general criteria for quality control of qualitative research and the specificity and proliferation of multiple traditions of qualitative methods (Yardley 2000, p. 217). Some authors advocate general criteria, or a "theory of the method" even for research methodologies as diverse as the descriptive phenomenological method and conversational analysis (Rennie 2012, p. 386).

This article advocates the need to establish general criteria (e.g., epistemological consistency; fulfil trustworthiness criteria), and to integrate them adequately with specific methodological criteria (e.g., the phenomenological descriptive method: use of the *epoché* and eidetic reduction). Thus we believe that this exercise is valid, not only for researchers who are more interested in the phenomenological method, but also to researchers from other traditions, since they can perform the same type of modification and specify their validity criteria more easily. Another important reason to defend these arguments relates to masters and doctoral students. There still seems to exist an enormous confusion in the quality control of qualitative research developed by students from different academic contexts that often, not being senior researchers or integrated into research units, feel greater difficulties in gathering literature and synthesizing the quality control criteria.

Validation in Qualitative Research

Various guidelines have been suggested for the validation of qualitative research. These may be divided into two basic groups: extrinsic (based on criteria imported from quantitative research and adapted to qualitative research) and intrinsic (based exclusively on the qualitative research context). It has been argued that the second option is preferable because it is a way of increasing the credibility of qualitative research (Morrow 2005).

The assessment of scientific knowledge involves three major concepts, namely, validation, reliability and generalization. A suggestion is made for qualitative research to emphasise the notions of *trustworthiness of the method*, *coherence of results*, and *transferability and application of results* (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 300; Hill et al. 1997, p. 556).

Trustworthiness of the Method

Trustworthiness of the method implies a series of procedures that involve the clear and rigorous description of all the methodological steps used in the research process, from the adequacy of the research question and participant sample to the theme under study, and the collection and analysis of data (Hill et al. 1997, p. 556; Morrow 2005, p. 255). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed a group of techniques that establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria include different techniques, for example, ensuring credibility may involve using triangulation (sources, methods, and investigators) or peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, p. 328). The criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability should be understood as equivalent to the concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, thus the authors advocate exclusively intrinsic concepts for the qualitative methods (Lincoln & Guba, p. 300). In this way, the first level of adequacy, as has been abundantly described, has to do with the coherence between the *paradigm*, methodology and validation processes, and the researcher must work hard to achieve this integration (Madill et al. 2000, p. 17). In relation to the method, the first area to monitor has to do with the adequacy of the *research question*, that is, whether the chosen methodology and epistemology framing the

research process are appropriate for the research topic. For example, if the research question is "What is the meaning of a therapeutic event or process? Why did it happen? How did it develop?," the researcher may want to use as a methodology: a hermeneutic method; a narrative case study or comprehensive process analysis. If the question is: "What is the nature of a particular therapeutic phenomenon? What defines or constitutes it?," then the researcher may wish to employ, for example, a phenomenological method (Elliott 1995, p. 55). It is the research question that must "indicate" which method of data analysis is adequate for the research.

The *sample* is an aspect that also needs to be analysed. Not all qualitative methods assume the human experience as the focus of their research. The narrative research can consider that the narrative is both the phenomenon under study and the research methodology itself (Creswell 2007, p. 54). In a descriptive-based phenomenological methodology, the focus of the research is to describe, understand, and clarify human experiences; this means that the participants should be chosen because they can offer fertile examples of the theme under study. As the unit of analysis is experience and not the individuals or groups, the participants are chosen in accordance with specific criteria, in order to make important contributions to the structure and character of the experience under investigation (Polkinghorne 2005, p. 139). These assumptions limit the representativeness of the sample, and more important than the number of participants are the data gathering procedures and the variety of evidence that these can produce.

The *adequacy of the data* has to do with the quality and thoroughness of the grounds upon which the conclusions are based. The central aim of data gathering is to determine evidence on the experiences that are being researched, so the researcher, in analysing the data, may define general descriptions from them of those same experiences (Morrow 2005, p. 255; Polkinghorne 2005, p. 139). In a research on significant events in psychotherapy, therapists were interviewed. They were asked to describe their subjective experience of significant moments experienced in the interaction with patients. However, most therapists were unable to describe their experience and rather responded with "theoretical issues" claiming that their main concern was to establish a relationship of trust with the patients etc. In this case there was no adequacy of the data since the descriptions did not truly express the subjective experience of the participants and did not answer the research question. Engagement with the material involves a profound immersion with the participants and the raw material collected which facilitates and promotes qualitative research. This aspect may include a more prolonged contact with participants and an exchange of information with other researchers in order to reassess initial conclusions (Stiles 1993, p. 604). Trustworthiness of data is explicit if (after contextual differences have been taken into account) the same type of data appears again and if the researcher manages to communicate what another colleague has reported (Stiles, p. 601).

The *methodological design* should reveal rigour and internal consistency in the application of the chosen method (e.g., phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic), thereby ensuring the credibility of the research process. The researcher identifies, communicates and carefully follows the steps of the method, which should be framed by the paradigm and epistemology (Morrow 2005, p. 259; Creswell 2007, p. 45). The internal consistency means that the methodological steps are consistent with the paradigm and with the method. It makes no sense to use a phenomenological descriptive research method and not make use of the phenomenological or eidetic reduction (Giorgi 2006, p. 355). If it happens, it means that the researcher claims to be using a method but does not present an internal consistency in using this method, since he does not present the essential steps of the methodology. This question may be related to a problem that seems to be present

in qualitative research: the overuse of "*bricolage*," sometimes ending in the mix of different methodologies, leading to a position of the "anything goes" (Sousa 2008 p. 149; Feyerabend 1975, p. 78), or at least to a position of excessive relativism called "blurred genres" (McLeod 2001, p. 9). Another example of internal inconsistency would be: the researcher does not explain the correct use of open coding, axial and conceptual, in a study which used the grounded theory as a data analysis method. It is important that the researcher expounds and clarifies a description of the internal research process, including reflexivity put into practice by him/herself, in such a way as to be clear to a critical reader (Stiles 1993, p. 603). Thus, certain procedures are encouraged as a way of making the research process more explicit: disclosure of orientation or researcher-as-instrument statement (the researcher should clarify his/her expectations, epistemological assumptions, preconceptions and values, including theoretical and scientific), and the; explanation of the social and cultural context (explicit description of the cultural and social context, given that the creation of meaning is a holistic process) (Stiles, p. 593; Morrow 2005, p. 259).

Results Coherence/Adequacy of Descriptions and Interpretations

The articulation of the analytical framework and the application of the method make it possible to systematize, based on the data, fundamental meanings and reliable interpretations that are plausible and coherently respond to the research questions. Good practice recommends a continuous cyclical interaction among descriptions, interpretations, and the data collected, following a circular logic of conjecture and validation, a dialectic that should be maintained until the general meaning structures are saturated (Ricoeur 1986, p. 225). Many qualitative methods advocate the principle that interpretations should arise from the data, it should be clear and explicit how more abstract constructions and conclusions are directly connected to the context and content of information and observations collected from the participants (Stiles 1993, p. 605; Hill et al. 1997, p. 558; Morrow 2005, p. 256). However, it is also possible that some theory is included in the data analysis process as is the case of some studies that use conversational analysis. Rennie (2012), following Pierce's theory of inference argues that abduction, theorematic deduction, and induction can work together in data analysis (Rennie 2012, p. 389). Indeed, there is a great deal of debate about the notion of data interpretation in qualitative research. The validation of data from qualitative research is directly related to the trustworthiness of its interpretations and conclusions, and these are considered to be reliable and coherent when they are internally consistent, effective and fecund, in other words, when there is *consistency of meaning* (Stiles, p. 607; Madill et al. 2000, p. 4). The plurality of meanings present in a holistic process of understanding descriptions goes beyond the polysemy present in individual words or the ambiguity of common sense sentences. Rather, the plurality of meanings and their adequacy are connected to the logic of qualitative probability. This is not a question of empirically verifying an observation, but of validating an interpretation that must be not only probable, but more plausible than its alternatives, when criteria of qualitative superiority, dialectic of conjecture, validation between data and interpretation are scrupulously followed (Ricoeur 1986, p. 225). The argumentative work of the researcher is to present interpretative evidence that should seek to go beyond citation (although this is an appropriate procedure for qualitative research), as validation has a more ambitious objective—namely, that the interpretative evidence validates a consensual meaning.

> The aim of validation is to give objective sanction to a particular interpretive hypothesis and thereby to provide the only possible for a consensus omnium

> with regard to the text. The consensus would not, of course, endorse any particular written interpretation, but rather the whole meaning to which several interpretations might refer—a particular intrinsic genre capable of governing implications, rather than a particular selection of implications. Such selections always vary and can do so without changing in any respect the whole, generic meaning of the text. (Hirsch 1967, p. 169)

Although the author is referring specifically to textual exegesis and hermeneutic work, which it is not at all in some cases, the central objective of the work of qualitative research is more centred on the description of experiences. Even so, this understanding of validation and interpretative evidence is adequate for qualitative analytic work and when the researcher seeks to provide evidence of the consistency of meaning of his/her interpretation of the data. The validation of interpretations may depend upon on two factors: (1) the *locus of impact* of the interpretations (readers, participants, researcher and theory) and (2) the *type of impact* (whether the impact is on the level of a simple agreement or fit regarding prior theoretical conceptions or if, on the contrary, it leads to growth and change in the prior understanding and knowledge) (Stiles 1993, p. 607). Again, different methods may address the use of theory differently as regards the impact of the outcome and the very process of data analysis. The descriptive phenomenological method can follow a purely inductive logic to the last step of the data analysis, when developing an eidetic structure of psychological meanings. It is only when establishing a post-structural analysis and the discussion with the literature starts, that the researcher allows himself to develop a more elaborate rhetoric about their results (Giorgi 2009, p. 179). In contrast, some researchers maintain that in the abduction reason analysis process, theorematic deduction combined with a demonstrative rhetoric increases the possibility of performing a reach and coherent data analysis (Rennie 2012, p. 391). What seems to be common and essential to different approaches is that researchers will always have to make transparent, clear and explicit the way they prepared their analysis from the data collected, and clearly demonstrate the consistency of the presented arguments (Yardley 2000, p. 222).

Coherence may find resonance with concepts, theories or conceptual models, or with readers and consumers of the research, or it may promote change, an alteration of knowledge relative to the phenomenon under study. The stress on validation does not remain only at the level of the researcher but also has an intersubjective dimension, given that the critical reader may intrinsically participate in validation processes. One of the strategies suggested by the authors to reinforce coherence is *triangulation*, which can involve the data collection from different sources and in different ways (e.g., interview and another research instrument), or the use of different judges to analyse the data. The central objective is to validate results by means of a convergence of perspectives (Hill et al. 1997, p. 558). Consensus presupposes a critical analysis between peers, i.e., another researcher who knows the method and the raw data considers the results convincing and coherent.

Transferability and Application of Results

The consistency and plausibility between the data and the interpretations are also concerned with how those interpretations may contribute to a furthering or even change in the knowledge about the subject of study. Interpretations must enable a new understanding, new perspectives on the phenomenon (Polio, Henley & Thompson 1997, p. 55).

Taking into consideration the paradigms framing qualitative research, these promote important epistemological changes, and as a consequence, the concept of generalized truth is altered; thus, the results of qualitative research are considered to be tentative in character, rather than universally established (Stiles 1993, p. 598). However, the aim of qualitative research is to establish and delineate theories and conceptual structures that can be generalized and applied to other contexts. In this way, it is important to consider the notion of *generation of theory* (Henwood & Pidgeon 1992, p. 101). Both quantitative and qualitative methods aim at producing valid scientific knowledge. However, naturalistic paradigms, working on the assumption that advances in knowledge are made from data to theory and not from hypothetical-deductive processes, require a distinction between the context of "discovery" and that of "justification." Mainstream psychology may associate the notion of "discovery" only to the creativity of an individual who produces knowledge that is more speculative than objective in nature. However, the notion of "theory generation" implies a continuous process of elaboration of new knowledge in systems of established meaning, an active accumulative process of representation and the re-representation of scientific knowledge. The construction of conceptual networks about particular phenomena of human experience, while not universally true, may be useful and important for contexts and populations beyond those upon which the theories were created.

The *applicability of results* is an important criterion to be considered in the assessment of quality and validation of qualitative research and is connected to *analytic generalization,* that is, the extent to which the results and conclusions of a study can orient other occurrences and situations (Kvale 1996, p. 233). In conclusion, Figure 1 was adapted by the author of the present article based on the previously cited authors (Henwood & Pidgeon 1992; Stiles 1993; Hill et al. 1997; Polio et al. 1997; Elliott, Fischer & Rennie 1999; Yardley 2000; Madill et al. 2000; Morrow 2005; Polkinghorne 2005; Creswell 2007; Rennie 2012). In this article, the terms "internal consistency" and "external consistency" are not synonyms of internal and external validity. Internal consistency refers to the ability of the researcher to maintain consistency between the appropriate research question, the sample, the adequacy of the data and data analysis. External consistency refers to the ability of the researcher to demonstrate a consistent line between theory and concepts used, and their applicability in the transformation of knowledge, generation of theories, and applicability of results.

Validation of Qualitative Phenomenological Descriptive Research

The criteria mentioned above may be considered by all the traditions of qualitative research. However, there are specific characteristics of each methodology can and must consider specific quality control criteria. Thus, to give an example, and after a short epistemological consideration, we will try to explain how the descriptive phenomenological method, after complying with the requirements previously established, can follow six criteria specific and adequate to its methodology. At this level, rather than a general or universal approach for all methods, we suggest that it to be is more suitable to present specific criteria for quality monitoring of each method. Despite the specificity of the six dimensions, it is deemed that one cannot make a dichotomy between the *results* and the *process* of the research. Therefore, contrary to some arguments in the literature (Smith 2011, p. 15), this article also wishes to present criteria on the process of research. To make explicit a guide to assist the evaluation of qualitative research that focuses only on the way the results must be presented is to open a gap between results and process when it is known that both depend on each other.

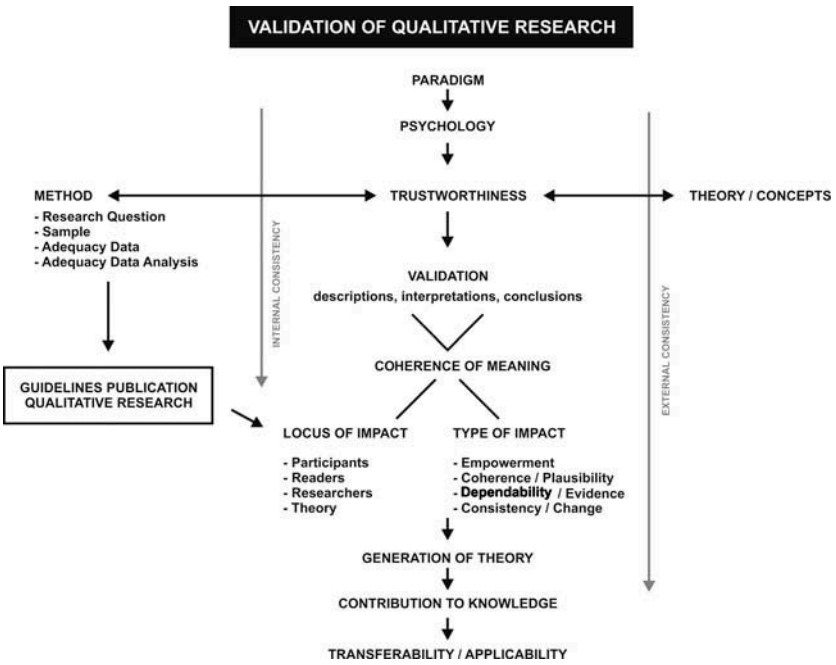

Figure 1. The structure for validation in qualitative research.

Phenomenological Research: Epistemological Contextualization

The discussion of validation, which concerns the scientific community with regards to qualitative research, goes back to the foundation of phenomenology. Husserl aimed at understanding the apparent paradox of how objective knowledge is grounded upon subjective acts of consciousness (Husserl 2001). For Husserl, consciousness is always the consciousness *of* something; it apprehends *real* (empirical) objects and *ideal* (nonempirical) objects. As the acts of consciousness may not be reduced to the empirical dimension, the intentional component places its object of knowledge at the level of *meaning*. The theory of intentionality, transcending the exclusively naturalist view of consciousness, explains how objectivity is constituted by subjective acts. However, the basis for the theory of knowledge is that which distinguishes simple from categorical intuition. In phenomenology, an *intuition* (a technical term in Husserl) means *that which is given in presence, more precisely, the way that an object comes to presence*. Objectivant acts, which are directed at real objects, are fulfilled by sensible perception, while ideal, nonempirical objects are fulfilled by categorical intuition. The knowledge produced may have a sensible base, but categorical knowledge cannot be reduced to sensible objects. Categorical intuition implies the systematic fulfilment of various intentional acts, creating new bonds between them, as in a spiral, in which the syntheses of signification gradually raise their level of evidence. Objects grounded in categorical intuition are *already new objects*, which add a knowing. In other words, it is in these acts that formal logical knowledge may be *constituted*.

The categorical object is not something merely subjective or strictly psychological. On the contrary, it is an objectively grounded independent object which presents an identity that may be questioned, verified, and validated, that is, a new consciousness of objectivity. Detached from a merely sensorial level, the higher-level categorical act has the possibility

of being placed in an intersubjective space, subject to criticism from different perspectives, able to be communicated in a common space, and is not confined to an exclusively mental or idiosyncratic dimension. In many circles of the qualitative research, phenomenology has been erroneously confounded as a methodology that gives voice to subjective evidences of the subjects lived experience. It is necessary, however, to make a clear distinguish: "a subjective account of experience should be distinguished from an account of subjective experience" (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, p. 19). However, categorical intuition is not synonymous with truth. There are different types of adequacy, and intentional consciousness establishes different types of categorical objects. But it is also clear that when categorical objects are detached at the perceptual level, because they are made explicit in an intersubjective space, they lack verification and validation. There is obviously a margin of error in the establishment of objectivant acts, which require continuous critical analysis, that is, of an intersubjective validity. Inconsistency, incoherence, ignorance, error, and contradiction are possible forms of inadequacy between thought and the given thing, which may occur in any human activity. The theory of phenomenological knowledge implies the possibility of placing its ideal objects in an intersubjective space, so that this can validate judgements and results. The space of categorical intuition is not that of personal opinions, but of the grounding of ideal objects which may be confirmed. The categorical object is not possessed by a subject, just as it does not exist in the subject's intrapsychic space. It is situated in a public space open to critical observation amongst peers.

Criteria for Validation of Descriptive Phenomenological Research

Six concepts are suggested to be able to help to control the validation of phenomenological research within the context of qualitative research in psychology: intentionality, the psychological phenomenological reduction, eidetic psychological analysis, syntheses of identification, phenomenon versus individual, and invariant structures (see Table 1).

Intentionality. The concept of intentionality implies realising a phenomenological analysis of the correlation between the subjectivity of intentional acts (e.g., perception, remembering, imagination) and the objectivity of the object given to consciousness (e.g., as perceived, as remembered, as imagined), the intentional object *as* it presents itself to consciousness and not what the object is in itself. Phenomenologically, *phenomenon* does not mean object, but the *mode*, the *appearance* of the object, the *intentional experience* of the object. Consequently, at a primary level, subjectivity and objectivity are interconnected. The second consequence is that intentionality does not imply the validation of objects as "real" or empirical facts, but as intentional phenomena, as explained in the *principle of all principles* of Husserl's static phenomenology:

> Enough now of absurd theories. No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the *principle of all principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition*, that *everything originarily* (so to speak, in its "personal" actuality) *offered* to us *in "intuition" is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being,* but also *only within the limits in which it is presented there.* (Husserl 1998, p. 44, italics in original)

This highlights that, for one, there is a validation of human intentionality that apprehends phenomena objectively and intuitively just as they present themselves to the consciousness, but there is also a limitation of that validation in that we can only consider how the object

Table 1
Criteria for evaluating the descriptive phenomenological method results

Concepts	Implications	Validation	Verification	Generalization	Focus
Intentionality	Interconnection subjectivity acts of consciousness and objectivity of objects as given to consciousness	Objectivity of the meaning of the intentional experience	Adequacy of meaning as evidence		Participants
Psychological phenomenological reduction	Noematic object	Suspension beliefs and of the natural attitude; control bias and theoretical assumptions; focus on phenomenon *as* experienced	It does not imply considering the "reality" of events or empirical facts		Researcher Reader
Eidetic analysis	Psychological essence	Rigorous description; modes of intersubjective appearance	Limitations that essences may not transcend or lose the character of *eidos*	Establishment of essential characteristics; variation of phenomenon, not of number of participants	Researcher Reader Theory/practice
Syntheses of identification	Multiple appearances, one identity	Acts of fulfilment, meanings established objectively (categorical objects)	Congruence and conformity despite multiple manifestations	Meanings present in different contexts	Researcher Reader
Phenomenon vs. individual	Focus on the phenomenon not individuals	Eidetic dimensions not specific of empirical variations	Check procedures (researchers, supervisors) not participants	Phenomenon beyond idiosyncratic perspective	Researcher Reader Theory/practice
Invariant structures	Typologies of knowledge	Generalizable but not universal	Coherence of psychological meaning syntheses, variations exhausted by eidetic analysis	Consistence of application to other subjects/contexts	Researcher Reader Theory/practice

is manifested (e.g., through an emotional experience, an interaction with another person, a state of affairs), and no other type of extrapolation is permitted at this level. There is, in Husserl, a connection among knowledge, intentionality, and consciousness. As the base structure of knowledge, intentionality articulates the adequacy of meaning as evidence. The objectivity of this same meaning is established by intentional consciousness. With the theory of intentionality, validation is concerned with the subject (participant's) experience, given that phenomenology considers only intentional experience, remaining at this level the articulation between the subjectivity of acts of consciousness and the objectivity of the object as experienced. The focus in this phase of the research is on the participant. Therefore, the key question at this point to monitor the quality of the results has to do with the ability of the researcher collect good descriptions about object of study, following the same logic of having a convenience sample. The validity is intrinsically linked to the description and the subjective experiences of the participants.

Psychological Phenomenological Reduction. At this moment, there is a shift in focus, which becomes centred on the researcher, for the pursuit of the remaining criteria. It is the individual who will apply psychological phenomenological reduction, not the participants, who describe their experiences in common sense language from a natural attitude. The psychological phenomenological reduction implies two methodological procedures, which only the researcher is competent to perform, namely the momentary suspension of belief of the natural attitude, of theoretical, cultural, social assumptions, and the consideration that all objects, people and states of things described by the participants are understood as intentional phenomena (i.e., just *as* experienced, not meaning that they in fact exist or have happened just as described by the participants).[1] Thus, the participants are focused on the descriptions of their experiences, while the researcher focuses on *the way in which* the objects are manifested to the subjects' intentional consciousness. The researcher concentrates upon the noematic object, accessible to whoever practises psychological phenomenological reduction. There are two different levels of analysis. The validation of psychological-phenomenological reduction is promoted by controlling the bias of the natural attitude and theoretical assumptions and by the focus that is established on the noematic object, without any allegation that this exists in "reality" as was described, so that its validation may not be limited to an empirical confirmation, not even by the subjects engaged in providing the descriptions of the natural attitude. The data from the phenomenological analysis carried out by the researcher must, for its part, be validated intersubjectively so that the critical reader, who understands the method, may check, correct and validate the research data (Zahavi 2003, p. 54).

Eidetic Psychological Analysis. The unveiling of the psychological essence of a phenomenon—the most invariant structure of a psychological experience within a particular context—diminishes the contingent or particular characteristics of the object under study, arriving at eidetic results, which are beyond empirical conditionality.

This is the method par excellence for the acquisition of qualitative knowledge, for it informs us of what something essentially is. Eidetic seeing or insight provides evidence of those features that must be present in any and all possible instances of a subject matter (Wertz 2005, p. 168).

Empirical variations may be present, although the object of study maintains its *eidos*, its fundamental characteristics, without which we would not be considering the same object. If, for example, we conceive that a chair may have various colours or be made of different materials, such as plastic or wood, and if it is consensual that removing the

seat it can no longer be considered a chair, then we can say that the first features are empirical variations, which do not alter an essential characteristic, that is, having a seat. We might also add that a chair is a cultural object made to support the human body in a seated position. This assertion, made on the basis of a specific object, does not prevent a generalizable perspective on the same object, maintaining the rigour and criteria of intersubjective acceptance. The aim is to remove the accessory characteristics and descriptively define its essentials that formalise the essential structure of a particular phenomenon. When it is properly understood, eidetic analysis contains within itself validation processes and the establishment of limitations on the possible variations that psychological meaning syntheses cannot transgress:

> The purpose of this method is to ascertain the limits which the variation must not transgress, in other words to disclose a structure or set of structures invariant throughout the process of variation, and which must be exhibited by every variety, actually or freely imagined, for that variety to partake of, or fall under, the Eidos in question. Such an invariant structure defines an Eidos. (Gurwitsch 1966, p. 698)

Syntheses of Identification. Another criterion for the validation and verification of data from a phenomenological investigation has to do with the way in which consciousness creates syntheses of identification through multiple appearances of the same object and establishes acts of meaning fulfilment, as described above. The unit of a particular psychological meaning, whether typical or general, and which may be manifested through a multiplicity of appearances and which are present to the intentional consciousness of the researcher, should follow a logic of adequacy and coherence, and not only a mere accumulation, which would not support an identity unit. The simple accumulation of appearances, arbitrarily chosen and combined, is no guarantee of a unity of identification. Evidence may be truthful or misleading, but the former maintain a congruence and conformity, despite the increase of their manifestations in ever-widening contexts (Gurwitsch 1966, p. 713). In Husserl's language signitive acts (empty acts) may be transformed into fulfilling acts, thereby giving synthesis of meaning. The same procedure arises from the processes of data analysis when applied the descriptive phenomenological method, with the help of imaginative free variation (eidetic analysis):

> So, the schema is: signifying acts → precise fulfilling act → act of identification. This is the process that takes place when transforming the life world meaning units into psychological expression, and the process is aided by the method of free imaginative variation. Free imaginative variation is helpful in settling the difference between partial objects of fulfilment and those objects that fulfil the empty meaning precisely. (Giorgi 2009, p. 133)

Phenomenon versus Individual. The phenomenological method has the aim of studying intentional, nonindividual phenomena. The research concentrates on the study of how a particular phenomenon is experienced by different subjects, seeks invariant aspects and tries to achieve a psychological meaning structure. In the last instance, what arises in the final results is the synthesis of psychological meanings about the phenomenon under study, not the individual experience of the subjects. Individual experiences are typified in general results. This is a substantial difference in relation to the Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis (IPA) as the latter focuses on the idiosyncratic experience. There are other significant differences that will not be focused in this text, since the IPA claims being simultaneously phenomenological, because it is directed to experience, and hermeneutic, because it uses a double interpretation and has the objective of studying the subjects cognition (Smith & Osborn 2003). In this way, the question of how to design control criteria of validity given the epistemological multiplicity of concepts remains. This is not the place to discuss the differences between IPA and the descriptive method in-depth but despite some guidelines been presented to help assisting the evaluation of IPA papers (Smith 2011) there are still some tensions existing. First, the author presented a guide to evaluate only the products of IPA investigations without presenting the criteria to validate the process research. Although expressing that aim, Smith seems to contradict its own goal when gives an example of one research conducted with IPA that he considers a "thoughtful interpretative analysis with three or four extracts per theme but does not give account of the extract selection process" (Smith, p. 18). A qualitative research methodology should stand on its own, independently of the object and results of research. Second, although IPA claims to be idiographic, one of the criteria most considered to evaluate the quality of the results is that the themes need to be present in several of the research's participants. Third, and by far a subject that deserves a reflection on its own, there is still a lack of comprehension of how a descriptive research process can do an in-depth analysis of the participants extracts. There is still an assumption the analysis of the participants descriptions should be interpretative and "not just" descriptive (Smith, p. 24).

Respect for the integrity of the subjects' experiences is maintained in the descriptive phenomenological research, as is the assumption that the meaning of the participants' descriptions arises from the intentional relations that they have with the world. The difference between the analysis of phenomena and the study of individuals also concerns the question of *verification*. It is common in the social and human sciences (and in some applications of the phenomenological method) to recommend the use of participant feedback as a way of validating results. That is to say, if participants understand the matter differently, they may suggest corrections and the researcher should alter the final research data (Colaizzi 1978, p. 61). This option is considered inadequate for various theoretical and practical reasons (Giorgi 2006, p. 353). The subjects' descriptions are told from the natural attitude. The protocols are analysed from both the phenomenological perspective and the perspective provided by the researcher's discipline (e.g., psychology, nursing). The phenomenological method and the researcher's discipline imply specific knowledge that may not be in the participants' domain. The method, when applied correctly, produces eidetic results that may only be verified with phenomenological procedures. This is not a question of disqualifying the participants, but rather of clarifying the level of analysis; the researchers and participants use different perspectives, which means that participant feedback would lead to error. Indeed, soliciting verification from the subjects themselves may incur enormous problems. The subject's viewpoint is not the same as the researcher's. The participants describe situations which, though having been experienced by themselves, largely remain on the prereflective level. The subjects experienced the situation and described it as it was experienced, as best they could, as phenomena given to consciousness. The researcher, for his/her part, aims to emphasise reflexivity, and although the starting point is the subjects' experiences, what s/he hopes to achieve are meaning structures from those experiences.

> If, however, by 'subjective' we mean the 'merely subjective' observations which characterize the reports of uncritical and untrained observers chosen

> at random, then phenomenology is definitely opposed to 'subjectivity.' It is fully aware that careful intuiting and faithful description are not to be taken for granted and that they require considerable degree of aptitude, training, and conscientious self-criticism. (Spiegelberg 1994, p. 689)

The researcher may return to the subjects *before* beginning analysis of the data, requesting clarification about the descriptions or more detail about certain aspects. That is to say, it is admissible to collect more descriptions prior to the application of the method, but not after it, to check the results. Moreover what is important is not so much the number of subjects contained in the sample, but the variability with which a particular phenomenon appears in the descriptions contained in the protocols (Giorgi 2009). This distinction between phenomenon and individual is directly related to the question of generalization.

Invariant Structures. The purpose of descriptive phenomenological investigation is not to characterize the idiosyncratic experience but rather to capture the invariant structures of the experience (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, p. 26). Again, at this level there is a clear difference between the descriptive phenomenological method and IPA. In the first, inter-subjective experiences shared among the participants are defined, in the second we remain at an idiosyncratic level. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology of, even when applied to psychology, focuses on the intersubjective dimension: "I must still mention the fact that as one can see, eidetic phenomenological psychology is anything but a mere eidetics of the individual ego; it is, rather, the eidetics of phenomenological inter-subjectivit" (Husserl 1997, p. 249).

By achieving typified knowledge, it is possible to systematize valid knowledge, without implying that they are true for all situations. The knowledge resulting from phenomenological research may be considered general (eidetic) but not universal; plausible and coherent, but not apodictic. Generalities (structures of psychological meaning about a particular phenomenon) lack subsequent verification, both as regards the performance of further studies and the applicability for psychological praxis. Nevertheless, their usefulness is unquestionable:

> Typologies or knowledge of limited generalities are quite valuable in psychology because what is universal is often trivial and of little use; variations (differences) that are not completely idiosyncratic, though not universally true, are usually the most significant. (Wertz 2005, p. 173)

As an example, we present a small extract (see Table 2) from a phenomenological investigation in which patients were interviewed about the therapeutic process. The eidetic dimensions created by researcher are general categories that may have empirical variations (Oliveira, Sousa & Pires 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

There are no absolute guarantees of the inexistence of error in research based upon the phenomenological method applied to psychology. The descriptions and structures of psychological meaning constructed by the researcher may be inadequate or may not do justice to the research data. There is no absolute guarantee, but the methodological procedures and theoretical assumptions are referential, which enables researchers and supervisors to

Table 2
Eidetic dimensions with empirical variations

Eidetic dimensions	Empirical variations from raw data	
Therapist disclosure	"I remember him revealing personal things about him (. . .) on rare occasion, punctiliously, but sometimes he told me stuff, like, his insecurities even (. . .) I felt it was a privilege you know . . . a sign of trust"	"(. . .) I can also remember a time where the doc told me about a motorcycle accident he suffered, that he was also incapacitated and needed someone to help him (. . .) I think there was a "sharing of" . . . and that led me to really believe that he truly understood my anger"
Insight/cognitive restructuring	"(. . .) And he says - It's okay, because what really matters is not your argument or his argument, but the way you feel and experience things and that . . . that argument is indestructible . . ."	"I remember him telling me - But notice . . . you're behaving like a masochist - something like that - You're harming yourself, you're being too hard on yourself . . ."
	"(. . .) it was a relief; it was a bit like starting . . . I started to have tools, to understand that no one is in possession of the truth you know? But I thought someone was . . . others (laughs)"	"(. . .) the masochism was based on this . . . I needed to gain awareness . . . I needed to accept this misfortune, what happened to me I needed to accept it. One has to accept misfortune."

perform the checks and balances inherent in stages of the research and of the results achieved. The same may be said for the critical reader that knows the method. We may allege that the results produce knowledge that is methodologically and epistemologically valid, and that they are sustainable and consistent and are presented in general structures that may be applied to other contexts. The phenomenological research method is not a prop for personal opinion. The possibility of error exists and may be corrected, but in existing, it is not concerned with the fact of being in the presence of an idiosyncratic methodology. As we are working within an eidetic discipline, it makes no sense to attempt to include empirical validation processes. In fact, the theory of evidence and Husserlian truth may not be confined to the factual proofs required by empirical epistemology. This does not mean that phenomenology does not offer a rigorous, methodical method, with control of bias as regards its object of study and valid for grounding new knowledge, in the context of the social and human sciences. On the contrary, the phenomenological method deals with the subjectivity and objectivity of knowledge. In conclusion, if syntheses of identity are confirmed to be adequate, then the psychological meanings established (new categorical objects) are revealed to be valid. The psychological meanings may be objectively described and may be generalizable to some extent, because they are constituted in invariant structures of experience, in intersubjective modes of appearance, translated into typified forms of knowledge. The possibility that these new ideal objects may be used consistently reveals the reliability of the results attained.

Note

1. "Under the phenomenological reduction, our concern is not the with objects *per se*, with objects as they really are in themselves, but rather with objects as meant and intended (*vermeint*); they must be taken into consideration exactly and only as they are meant and intended" (Gurwitsch 1966, p. 712).

References

Colaizzi, PF 1978, 'Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it', in RS Valle & M King (eds.), *Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 48–71.

Creswell, JW 2007, *Qualitative inquiry and research design*, Sage, London.

Crotty, M 1998, *The foundations of social research*, Sage, London.

Elliott, R 1995, 'Therapy process research and clinical practice: practical strategies', in M Aveline & DA Shapiro (eds.), *Research foundations for psychotherapy practice*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, pp. 49–72.

Elliott, R, Fischer, CT & Rennie, D 1999, 'Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative studies in psychology and related fields', *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 38, pp. 215–29.

Feyerabend, P 1975, *Contra o método*, Relógio d'Água, Lisboa.

Gallagher, S & Zahavi, D 2008, *The phenomenological mind*, Routledge, New York.

Giorgi, A 2002, 'The question of validity in qualitative research', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 2–18.

Giorgi, A 2006, 'Difficulties encountered in the application of the phenomenological method in the social sciences', *Análise Psicológica*, vol. XXIV, no. 3, pp. 353–62.

Giorgi, A 2009, *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh.

Gurwitsch, A 1966, 'Edmund Husserl's conception of phenomenological psychology', *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 689–727.

Henwood, K & Pidgeon, N 1992, 'Qualitative research and psychological theorizing', *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 83, pp. 97–111.

Hill, CE & Lambert, MJ 2004, 'Methodological issues in studying psychotherapy process and outcomes', in MJ Lambert (ed.), *Bergin and Garlfield's handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, pp. 84–135.

Hill, CE, Thompson, BJ & Williams, BJ 1997, 'A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research', *The Counselling Psychologist*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 517–72.

Hirsch, ED 1967, *Validity in interpretation*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Holloway, I & Todres, L 2003, 'The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 345–57.

Husserl, E 1997, 'The Amsterdam lectures on phenomenological psychology', in T Sheehan & RE Palmer (eds.), *Psychological and transcendental phenomenology and the confrontation with Heidegger*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 83–116.

Husserl, E 1998, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: first book*, Kluwer, Dordrecht.

Husserl, E 2001, *Logical investigations*, Routledge, Oxon.

Kvale, S 1996, *InterViews. An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*, Sage, London.

Lincoln, YS & Guba, EG 1985, *Naturalistic inquiry*, Sage, London.

Madill, A, Jordan, A & Shirley, C 2000, 'Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies', *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 91, pp. 1–20.

McLeod, J 2001, *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*, Sage, London.

Morrow, SL 2005, 'Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counselling psychology', *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 250–60.

Oliveira, A, Sousa, D & Pires, A 2012, 'Significant events on existential psychotherapy: the client's perspective', *Existentia Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 134–57.
Paisana, J 1992, *Fenomenologia e hermenêutica*, Editorial Presença, Lisboa.
Polio, H, Henley, T & Thompson, C 1997, *The phenomenology of everyday life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
Polkinghorne, D 1983, *Methodology for the human sciences*, State University of New York Press, Albany.
Polkinghorne, D 1989, 'Phenomenological research methods', in RS Valle & S Halling (eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology*, Plenum Press, New York, pp. 41–60.
Polkinghorne, D 2005, 'Language and meaning: data collection in qualitative research', *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 137–45.
Rennie, DL 2012, 'Qualitative research as methodical hermeneutics', *Psychological Methods*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 385–98.
Rennie, DL, Watson, KD & Monteiro, AM 2002, 'The rise of qualitative research in psychology', *Canadian Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 179–89.
Ricoeur, P 1986, *Du texte à l'action – essais d'herméneutic II*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.
Smith, AJ 2011, 'Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis', *Health Psychology Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 9–27.
Smith, JA & Osborn, M 2003, 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis', in J Smith (ed.), *Qualitative psychology: a practical guide to research methods*, Sage, London, pp. 112–34.
Sousa, D 2008, 'From Monet's paintings to Margaret's ducks. Divagations on phenomenological research', *Existential Analysis*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 143–155.
Sousa Santos, B 1987, *Um discurso sobre as ciências*, Edições Afrontamento, Porto.
Spiegelberg, H 1994, *The phenomenological movement. a historical introduction*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, London.
Stiles, WB 1993, 'Quality control in qualitative research', *Clinical Psychology Review*, vol. 13, pp. 593–618.
Wertz, F 2005, 'Phenomenological research methods for counselling psychology', *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 167–77.
Yardley, L 2000, 'The dilemmas in qualitative health research', *Psychology and Health*, vol. 15, pp. 215–28.
Zahavi, D 2003, *Husserl's phenomenology*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

About the Author

Daniel Sousa is an auxiliary professor at ISPA - University Institute where he lectures seminars on research methods in clinical psychology, psychotherapy, and phenomenological psychology. He is also a founding member, supervisor, and lecturer of the Portuguese Society for Existential Psychotherapy. His main research interests are centered on psychotherapy relationship and skills, client feedback, and feedback systems on psychotherapy.