

Research Method and Phenomenological Pedagogy. Reflections from Piero Bertolini

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Husserlian phenomenology, Piero Bertolini defined the phenomenological pedagogy and education as a scientific discipline (Bertolini, 2005). This project remains an undetermined one as there is still room for defining its research methods. This article intends to propose a contribution to the discussion of research methodology, in line with the assumptions of Piero Bertolini (1988) phenomenological pedagogy. In particular, starting from the definition of phenomenological pedagogy and education, it aims to answer the question: what are the research strategies through which to build a viable and rigorous educational knowledge, able to grasp the personal transformation and development in a context of inter-subjectivity? Accordingly, I shall discuss data collection and analysis strategies.

Keywords: Phenomenological Pedagogy – Research Methodology – Piero Bertolini – Qualitative research – Phenomenological Research

Il metodo di ricerca e la pedagogia fenomenologica. Riflessioni a partire da Piero Bertolini

A partire dalle suggestioni della fenomenologia husserliana, Piero Bertolini ha definito la pedagogia fenomenologica come scienza (Bertolini, 2005). Questa costituzione epistemologica è rimasta un progetto aperto, dal momento che Bertolini non ha mai definito un metodo di ricerca in sintonia con le dimensioni fenomenologiche della pedagogia. Questo articolo intende proporre un contributo all'interno della discussione in metodologia della ricerca, in linea con gli assunti della pedagogia fenomenologica di Piero Bertolini (1988). In particolare, a partire dalla sua definizione di pedagogia fenomenologica (e di educazione), si vuole rispondere alla domanda: quali sono le strategie conoscitive attraverso le quali costruire una conoscenza pedagogica valida e rigorosa, in grado di cogliere la trasformazione e il cambiamento personale in un contesto di intersoggettività? Infine, sono discusse alcune strategie di raccolta e di analisi dei dati.

Parole chiave: Pedagogia fenomenologica – Metodologia della Ricerca – Piero Bertolini – Ricerca qualitativa - Ricerca fenomenologica

Introduction: the definition of Phenomenological Pedagogy

Piero Bertolini (1931-2006) was a pivotal figure of phenomenology in education and pedagogy. For what concerns the Italian debate, one of his main contributions was the constitution of pedagogy as a scientific discipline. To accomplish this aim, Bertolini referred primarily to the Husserlian phenomenology as a philosophical method for comprehending reality and human experiences. According to Bertolini (1988), for education, obtaining an epistemological status of "science" means making its content clear and explicit. Bertolini tried to answer the questions: when the human experience is educative? what is the educative "thing itself" or the educative phenomenon within the original human reality?

Bertolini has made use of the concept of regional ontology to identify a particular field of education within the Life-World or *Lebenswelt*. In this particular circumstance, it is evident the content (and a phenomenological definition) of the pedagogic and educative discipline—it is the study of original human experience that consists in the capability to "change" in a context of intersubjectivity.

But the Bertolini's constitution of pedagogy, as a science, remains an undetermined project. If it was important to define, in fact, the *proprium* of scientific discipline, that is the unique research topic of a discipline (Bertolini, 2005), it is equally important to determine its methods. While Italian phenomenological pedagogy movement carried out mostly theoretical studies and researches regarding the methodology of educational interventions, space remains for the definition of research methods for phenomenological pedagogy, according to Bertolini.

This article intends to propose a contribution to the discussion of research methodology, in line with the assumptions of Piero Bertolini phenomenological pedagogy. In particular, starting from the phenomenological definition of education, it aims to answer the question: what are the research strategies through which to build a viable and rigorous educational knowledge, able to grasp the personal transformation and development in a context of intersubjectivity?

Following, then, Bertolini (1988), I shall try to put into dialogue the Bertolini's proposal of phenomenological pedagogy and research methodology, highlighting possible assumptions and features that better than others can strengthen the scientific proposal of phenomenological pedagogy itself. In fact, according to a genuine phenomenological approach is the "thing itself" to suggest how researchers could study it: the method should come from the *proprium*, from the phenomenon. The contrary would disclaim the underpinning phenomenological approach.

Phenomenological Pedagogy and Research Methodology

Defining the scientific characteristics of phenomenological pedagogy, Bertolini (1988) has, at the same time, suggested the terms of how knowledge of the educative phenomenon is possible. From an epistemological standpoint, in fact, Bertolini suggested six key features of the educative phenomenon. These features allow researchers to understand not only how the phenomenological pedagogy works as a science, but also to what methodology is more in tune and continuity.

The phenomenon of education or, as Bertolini (1988) specifies, the educative experience can be studied in terms of:

- Globality: Researchers cannot isolate one or a few variables of the educative experience.
- Interdisciplinarity: The results of scientific research are always to be considered insufficient by themselves, as "no object, nothing is visible to humans in its totality, but always from a particular (space-time) perspective" (Bertolini 1988, p. 106 original in Italian).
- Relatedness: The educative phenomenon can be studied if inscribed in a relational event.
- Temporality: The educative phenomenon is historically given.
- Opening: Expanding and improving the existential experience of learners and persons are aims of the educational research.
- Comprehension: The educative phenomenon refuses any "Objectivist and objectifying methodologically attitude". The research method should include the "world view" and meanings of participants.

In this sense, a phenomenological research methodology should be able to suggest embracing and strategies to study a complex phenomenon that the narrow areas of isolated disciplines cannot resolve. The educative event is itself a relational event that involves not only the experiences of participants, but also what surrounds those experiences: the educational context, settings, the educators' worldview, the interplay between expectations, needs, and educational objectives.

Also, educational research is configured like an intrinsic evaluative research as values and goals of the educative experience are inseparable from the object of the study. The research results should, in other words, judge the educational event concerning whether it improves the life of learners and persons or not. Therefore, it is not possible, to rigidly separate educational research and ethics, as well as Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest. Bertolini affirms:

[...] It is necessary to pose the question about the impact of available educational instruments or strategies on subjects [...]. It seems to us that the ability to "unmask" improper elements in historical determinations of educative experiences, such as ideological pre-assumptions operating within urges and directions unrelated to the fundamental structure of the educative experience itself, represents an absolute necessity for an authentic pedagogy as a science. Those ideological motivations may make education an unwitting instrument of alienation or existential disorder. (Bertolini, 1988, p. 261, original in Italian)

The usefulness of research in phenomenological pedagogy is strongly linked to the modification (regarding improvement and therefore ethics) of the real situation. It resonates here the leitmotif of the so-called evidence-based education (Davies, 1999). I will not stress the debate on evidence-based education here (see Hammersley, 1997; 2007). It is sufficient here to highlight the need to anchor the identification of modifying strategies to justified motivations (those coming from research). As claimed by Davies (1999), in fact, places emphasis on not related to a context, as suggested by the phenomenological pedagogy too. And there is no single, universally accepted, definition of evidence. But this cannot be an excuse not to conduct educational research.

The whole point of the matter is then in the way we build the scientific discourse, especially in the way in which we use the results that are achieved by that way. There is no doubt that it is entirely different, not only on epistemological level but also on the applicative one, the attitude of those who believe that these results are "sure" (objective, according to the traditional meaning of the term) and therefore the whole truth or meaning of human experience must be reduced to them, compared to the attitude of those who, on the contrary, believes that that way and those results are just one of the possible ways and results to achieve in order to understand the world around us. In any case, scientific results are always provisional and problematic, thus open to constant rethinking. (Bertolini, 1988, p. 258, original in Italian)

A constant rethinking is the suggestion of a methodology which embraces interdisciplinarity. In fact,

Any phenomenon cannot be understood by one particular science [...] In this sense, it is considered "normal" and scientifically authorized eliciting divergent meanings of educative experiences, even if they do not correspond to what phenomenological pedagogy would affirm. As well as - but this is far less accepted by the other sciences - it should be considered "reasonable" and scientifically legitimate that education sees other experiences by its lens. We repeat then that each of those scientific

interpretations is entirely justified, and it is therefore perfectly licit that other sciences consider the educative experience in its various historical determinations as one of the possible objects of their research and even their applicative commitment. But we repeat that even this form of legitimation does not authorize no matter what science to be considered the sole or primary source of knowledge about the educative experience. (Bertolini, 1998, p. 277, original in Italian)

The interdisciplinarity is not just theoretical, it is part of phenomenological pedagogy research methodology, it is a research technique. Arguing that diverse disciplines can have their say on the educative phenomenon does not mean supporting a juxtaposition of the results, according to a pointillist logic. The interdisciplinarity is an opportunity for successful integration and an enriching scientific dialogue, performed via efficient and factual teamwork. The research cooperation "is not only consistent with our understanding of education as a science, but it is an essential condition for scientific correctness" (Bertolini, 1988, p. 297, *original in Italian*). The teamwork in research is the prerequisite for inter-subjective corroboration of research methods, analysis' strategies, and research results. Research cannot be conducted by one researcher alone.

Epistemological and ontological assumptions for research in phenomenological pedagogy and education

Methodology defines general guidelines on how to conduct research (Bengtsson, 2013). It should come along with a broader reflection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mortari, 2015), which encompasses epistemological, ontological assumptions, and ethics. Values within educative relationships and experiences were well discussed by Bertolini (2005). On the contrary, epistemology and ontology in Italian phenomenological pedagogy have not thought of about research. The epistemological and ontological assumptions of phenomenological research in pedagogy can, however, be traced within the phenomenological (both continental and Anglo-Saxon) debate. They are grounded into Husserl's invitation (1901/1980) to be faithful to phenomena.

Being faithful to the phenomenon means accepting two principles, interacting with each other: the principle of evidence and the principle of transcendence. Every phenomenon has its specific way of appearing—the principle of evidence requires that researchers move only in the direction suggested by the phenomenon. The research object does not immediately reveal its essence. This is due to the fact that the being of a “thing” is not completely transparent to our look since each “thing” has its own specific way to transcend its appearance (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010). The emergence of a phenomenon is always a revealing and concealing. For this reason, it is necessary to take into account also the second principle,

that of transcendence, which consists of going beyond what immediately appears. The essence reveals itself to researchers describing what seems. Though descriptions, researchers may reach a fundamental and profound knowledge of the phenomenon. The essence is, in fact, the primary meaning of the experience of an individual; it is the essence to make the experience what it is.

Phenomenology is a method for understanding the significance of the lived experience. It does not want to explain it (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010), it describes it starting from faithfulness to phenomena and intersubjectivity. Husserl's phenomenology seeks the invariant characteristics of human experience, thus emphasizing the value of intersubjective perceptions. This is the phenomenological realism: an inter-subjective realism, based on faithfulness to the phenomenon, as the result of sharing points of view. The reality according to Husserl, then, is never only in the mind of an individual, but it regarding in a shared process of meaning-making. Within this realism, phenomenology becomes the science of essences, namely, the study of the emerging structure of the "thing" (De Monticelli & Conni, 2008), that is, the experience. Consequently, phenomenological pedagogy becomes the science of the educational experience.

From Methodology to Method

The research methodology about the phenomenological pedagogy of Bertolini appears to be rather comprehensive and flexible. A problem may arise when researchers are required to implement research projects, following rigorous methods and strategies. Bengtsson (2013) has well understood this dilemma in phenomenology, in fact, a paradox. The requirements of scientific methods are likely, in fact, to stifle the *proprium* and the educative phenomenon, and create it in its own image. This, however, is not methodologically correct: a method that gives voice to the educative phenomenon is needed. The conflict between the phenomenon and a particular method exists, says Bengtsson (2013), only if the same method should be applied in all research, or in other words if this implies the existence of a general method that should be used indiscriminately in every educational research.

It is evident how this is to be rejected. Moreover, it is methodologically possible to develop "methods from within the experience" (Mazzoni, 2016) and in line with the combination of a generative research question and the ontological understanding of the phenomenon to be studied. If the research is done in this way, then there is no conflict between methodology, method, and "things" (Bengtsson, 2013).

In literature, we can trace proposals of phenomenological research methods, which have long been in use and accredited. This is not the place to make an in-depth examination of each phenomenological method. According to the purpose of this article, it will be enough to understand the use of different methods about different research questions. In fact, the

transition from methodology to the research method, that is, to strategies for the collection and analysis of data, crosses first of all the stage of the research question construction. The research question or generative questions aim to select a particular and circumscribed experience within the broad phenomenon of education. The research question has to comply with the theoretical framework and to allow the implementation of methodological directions. In this sense, in the phenomenological pedagogy, research question inquires a complex educational experience. It does not isolate a variable, but it helps to define the understanding of an event as a whole. The research question is also set in a manner that allows different scientific disciplines to make their contribution. It is, therefore, a generative question strongly influenced by the definition of the *proprium* of phenomenological pedagogy and which should aim to study education as the personal transformation in a context of intersubjectivity.

The choice of method depends on the research question, and on the way the research team formulates it. By way of example, I list below five research questions about a particular educational experience, the hospital schooling, putting them about phenomenological research methods researchers may retrieve from the methodological literature.

–*How is the lived-experience of hospital schooling?*

The question aims to explore a lived-experience that is the essence or the general structure of living school in the hospital. This research question refers to a descriptive (Giorgi, 1985) or transcendental method. The goal is not to construct interpretations, but to describe the characteristics that do not change from person to person, that is, those features that define the experience of living the school as hospitalized students in general.

–*How is my experience of hospital schooling?*

The question intends to investigate the way in which people give meaning to the experience of hospital school. It refers to the heuristic or hermeneutic phenomenology (Moustakas, 1990). The aim is to specify an elaborate description and a creative synthesis of the experience, utilizing both data from autobiographical narratives, such as diaries and everything that is deriving from personal forms of expression (art, literature, poetry, and so on).

–*How is the life-world of those who attend compulsory school in a hospital?*

The question introduces a crucial phenomenological concept: *Lebenswelt* or Life-world. Life-world is the prereflective stance within which people live and experience reality. Life-world impacts the way people give meaning to what they live. This research question can be answered using embodied lifeworld approach. The objective of this question is, then, to understand the meaning in between the person who attends the compulsory school in a hospital and the everyday experiences. The aim is to highlight the existential aspects, the embodied experience, the construction of personal identity, meaning that the person gives to their interpersonal relationships (Langeveld, 1983; van Manen, 1990).

– *How is the individual experience of hospital schooling?*

The question addresses what varies from person to person in the experience of hospital school. We refer here to the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The goal is to reach, through thematic analysis, interpretations from subjective points of view.

– *What are the stories of those who attend compulsory school in a hospital?*

The question asks researchers to explore the narratives produced by the participants together with researchers about the experience of hospital schooling. This refers to the narrative approach. The objective is to define a narration of the phenomenon from participants' perspective (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Reissman, 2007).

These research questions require each a different phenomenological approach. Nevertheless, the main differences among them can be classified into two broad categories: descriptive phenomenological methods and interpretive phenomenological methods. The descriptive approach emphasizes the description of universal essences (eidetic structures). The interpretive methods focus more on the understanding of the phenomenon in the context where practices and language are co-constructed and understood together with researchers.

As stated above, these methods should be taken as suggestions for researchers: the value of those research questions' examples resides in informing researchers within phenomenological pedagogy about the possibility of using a different kind of research methods, that may be attuned to phenomenological pedagogy recommendations.

Data collection

Bertolini states:

we are well aware of the gap that exists or seems to exist between an inclusive research methodology (such as phenomenological research which addresses the meaning or multiple meanings of phenomenon, and therefore is more interested in the qualitative aspects), and an "empirical" research methodology, which hunts 'secure' data with its quantitative instruments (we refer, is well clear, to the behavioral observation methods, surveys, questionnaires, statistics etc.) because the constancy of data repetitions gives researchers certainty and research validity. [...] We do not think that the undoubted existence of such a gap must necessarily be considered in terms of an irreconcilable conflict or an inevitable mutual exclusion, as too often it is claimed by each research methodology affiliated

scientists. On the contrary [...] we believe [...] that between those two orientations of educational research there or, rather, there must be an as clear and conscious as possible complementarity. (Bertolini, 1988, p. 269, original in Italian)

Interesting indication by the phenomenological pedagogy concerns, thus, the non-competitiveness between qualitative and quantitative data where the goal is, as stated, the understanding of the educative phenomenon as a whole. It is clear that qualitative research methods may better understand the educative phenomena (that is, the personal transformation experience and the identity development in a context of inter-subjectivity). Anyhow, I propose a method for the phenomenological pedagogy which can also deal with quantitative data, to the extent that they will undergo to the same descriptive or interpretative action.

It is evident, however, that, given the methodological presuppositions of phenomenological pedagogy, data collection strategies to be favored are those from in-depth interviews, narrative interviews, and autobiographical artifacts (diaries, photographs and personal videos, life stories). The objective is to enable the researchers to understand the more they can, the first-person perspective. Researchers, in fact, are not so interested in involving a statistically significant sample of participants in the research. Rather the regulative idea is achieving meaningful phenomenological experiences. With a limited sample, researchers may genuinely understand the existential significance of a particular educative experience and describe the structure of an experience, shedding light on the "world" lived by participants (Sasso, Bagnasco & Ghirotto, 2015).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process through which the researchers tend, in the results, to report faithfully how the phenomenon appears. Two analytical strategies allow researchers to achieve the faithfulness to the phenomenon: the *epoché* (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010; see also Tarozzi, 2006) and the imaginative variation.

The *epoché* transforms the researchers' natural attitude. *Epoché* helps researchers in not assuming any implicit or predefined knowledge.

The epoché does not eliminate anything, does not cancel the experience of the world, nor the assumption of it or assumptions about it - even those based on naive beliefs or prejudiced knowledge of it. Our scientific and pre-scientific knowledge is not denied. We only refrain from conferring

validity on such knowledge. Everything that was obvious becomes a phenomenon, a meaning for someone's consciousness. But our pre-comprehensions and anticipated knowledge have to be appropriately registered and documented in order to be recalled when, after a careful description of the phenomenon, we recover what we put into brackets. In some sense, we can say that basically, the epoché attitude is the research itself. (Mortari & Tarozzi 2010, pp. 33-34).

Husserl (1931/1999) in *Cartesian Meditations* argues that consciousness is capable of operation of varying a fact, an experience, an idea of an object, turning it into a purely free imagination (*Erdenklichkeit*). This ability of human consciousness allows a sort of "representation" of the essential experience of the phenomenon. In research, the imaginative variation is a strategy used to reveal possible meanings through the use of imagination, by varying phenomenon's patterns and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives. The goal of imaginative variation is to discover the underlying factors of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). For van Manen (1990) and Giorgi (1985), the imaginative variation is a reflective process that allows researchers to find out which aspects or qualities of a phenomenon are essential and which are accidental. In this sense, the phenomenological research tries to tend to the things themselves.

In Giorgi (1985), the phenomenologist writes an accurate description concerning individual experiences, but the description is only part of the data analysis process. The result of a phenomenological research should be a synthesis; that is a general statement which is a reflection of the essential structures which comprehend all the experiences. The imaginative variation helps, then, the researchers to define structural characteristics of a phenomenon. The imaginative variation opens to the description of the synthesis of meanings and essences where these are the condition or the quality without which a thing would not be what it is.

These analytical strategies fit well a research method in phenomenological pedagogy, and education and help researchers do not forget the "whole" (or essence) of an educative phenomenon.

Conclusions

According to the definition of phenomenological pedagogy and education, I derived from Bertolini (1988) some methodological indications which are consistent with his epistemological assumptions. It seems important for researchers to tend to brighten a particular human phenomenon, experienced by participants, with no pretensions of generalization. I wanted to try to clear as in phenomenology, is the phenomenon to determine the method. If the phenomenon (the "thing itself") is the human beings' original experience, which consists in the capability to change in a context of intersubjectivity, what should

emerge is not a causal relationship among variables (see Bertolini & Caronia, 1993), but the meaning of the educative lived experience in a specific context.

The signification processes within which data collection strategies are grafted are strongly related to the first-person perspective. The *epoché* and imaginative variation are useful means to understand the "world" of the participants and their lived context.

Every human experience, according to phenomenology, is based on a "reality" that although it can be described in many different ways, is framed in a unique horizon. It is the phenomenological realism. Each phenomenological study is not replicable, but the results can be recognized by externals. According to Giorgi (1985), in fact, a researcher can describe a structure of an experience in a different way by another researcher, but these descriptions will never be in every way different. The data, the context and the experience under investigation are part of the same world—the research validity is not related to the fact that two researchers describe the experience in the same way: validity regards whether an external viewer can see what the researchers saw.

A research method for phenomenological pedagogy and education is suggested: even if it is strongly related to already-in-use phenomenological research methods, this proposal cannot be seen as a complete overlap. In fact, the Bertolini's definition of phenomenological pedagogy and education I followed, requests researchers to comprehend the educative phenomenon regarding globality, interdisciplinarity, relatedness, and temporality. The objective of research in phenomenological pedagogy is, therefore, comprehending the educative lived experiences of persons, always in a context of intersubjectivity, and studying ways for individuals' existential improvement, according to ethics, without losing the "quantities" that may make more comprehensible the educative phenomenon.

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