

# Philosophical underpinnings



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## **Philosophical Underpinnings**

Phenomenology is one of many types of qualitative research that examines the lived experience of humans (Byrne, 2001). It is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Woodruff Smith, 2008). In its most basic form, phenomenology attempts to create conditions for the objective study of the content, or product, of conscious experiences.

Phenomenology has been practiced in various guises for centuries, but it came into its own in the early 20th century in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others. According to the Center for Advanced Phenomenological Research (1997), there are many branches of phenomenology. However, there are seven widely accepted features of the phenomenological Approach. Of these seven features, I have listed the six that I consider to be most instructive as an introduction to Phenomenology:

- 1) The rejection of unobservable matters and ‘ grand systems’ erected in speculative thinking
- 2) The rejection of positivism or objectivism
- 3) The justification of cognition – or ‘ the process of thought’, which leads to “ awareness of a matter itself as disclosed in the most clear, distinct and adequate way for something of its kind” Center for Advanced Phenomenological Research (1997).

4) The belief that, not only objects in the natural and cultural worlds, but also ‘ ideal objects’ (e. g. numbers) and conscious life, can be made evident and thus, known.

5) The belief that inquiry ought to focus upon what might be called encountering as it is directed at objects and, correlatively, upon objects as they are encountered

6) The recognition of the role of ‘ description’ in universal, a priori terms, as superior to ‘ explanation’, by means of causes, purposes, or grounds

Principally, phenomenologists believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world. For me, Shaw (2002) crystalises the proposition of phenomenology when she (2002, p. 130) asks, “ what happens when spontaneity, unpredictability and our capacity to be surprised by ourselves are not explained away but kept at the very heart of an account of the evolution of sense-of-self-in-the-world?” In other words, phenomenology is the art of extracting meaning from the complex mesh of ideas, feelings, interpretations, etc; that make up our lived experience. Phenomenologists do not believe that knowledge can be qualified or reduced to numbers of statistics (Byrne (2001). This rejection of the empirical – as the ‘ one true source’ of knowledge, is a direct rebuttal of objectivism – the worldview growing from modern natural science and technology that has been spreading from Northern Europe since the Renaissance (Center for Advanced Phenomenological Research, 1997); which maintains that the data of ‘ sense experience’ are the only object and the supreme criterion of human knowledge (Sauvage, 1911).

“ For objectivists, the inclination is towards ‘ scientific’ methods...these methods ignore the fact that the social world is meaningful to those who live in it, and they (the methods) impose their own, seemingly arbitrary meanings onto it” Crossley (1996, p. 74-75)

Nagel (1974) challenges the over-simplification or ‘ reduction’ of the lived experience into convenient or recognisable bites, by arguing that ‘ consciousness’ itself – that is to say, the subjective view of what it is like to have a certain type of experience, for instance, to feel love, or pain; or to know what it’s like to feel trusted – is beyond the reach of scientific theory,

“ Every reductionist has his favourite analogy from modern science. It is most unlikely that any of these unrelated examples of successful reduction will shed light on the relation of mind to brain. But philosophers share the general human weakness for explanations of what is incomprehensible in terms suited for what is familiar and well understood, though entirely different,” Nagel (1974, p. 435)

Phenomenology then is aimed at comprehending the structure of various types of human experience, ranging from thought, memory, imagination, emotion, and desire (Woodruff Smith, 2008).

### **Inter-subjectivity**

According to phenomenologists (Woodruff Smith, 2008), the central structure of an experience is its intentionality; that is to say, “ the characteristic of consciousness whereby it is conscious of something – i. e., its directedness toward an object” (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009). An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which

represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions. Where first-person meaning is the object of the enquiry, the classical phenomenological methodology may result in an enriched subjective understanding or awareness of the lived experience. These are:

(1) The individual describes a type of experience, just as he/she finds it in his/her own (past) experience.

(2) The individual interprets a type of experience by relating it to relevant features in context

(3) The individual analyses the form of a type of experience

(Woodruff Smith, 2008)

However, as Crossley (1996) points out, when the object of the enquiry is shared knowledge and/or understanding, this type of reflective process is insufficient, precisely because of the subjectivity involved,

“ The meaning of certain actions is identified with the plan of the actor, which may well be unavailable to the other. Or rather, the act may have different meanings for the actor and their other, respectively.” Crossley (1996, p. 78)

For a group to attempt to make sense of experience in this way is akin to the classical children’s fable of the blind men and the elephant. In various versions of the tale, a group of blind men touch an elephant to learn what it is like. Each one reaches out and finds a different part of the elephant’s body, such as the trunk or one of the tusks. They then each attempt to

describe the elephant to their peers, based only on what they felt. They quickly learn that they are in complete disagreement with one another. The story illustrates that reality, viewed from different angles or perspectives; may show up in very different – even contradictory – forms. As Argyris, et al. (1985) point out, when multiple individuals commence a shared inquiry, from a subjective, rather than an inter-subjective starting-point; the resulting discussion tends to degenerate into a contest of wills,

“ The validity of inquiring in action is threatened by a variety of defensive routines, including self-censorship and face-saving. Our research indicates that human beings, when dealing with threatening issues, typically act in ways that inhibit the generation of valid information and that create self-sealing patterns of escalating error” Argyris, et al. (1985, p. 61)

This phenomena is partly related to the way the human brain is hardwired to treat incoming data,

“...whenever we look at the world we are only too ready to see the world in terms of our existing patterns... This is what makes perception so powerful and so useful. We are rarely at a loss. We can recognise most situations. This is also why the analysis of information will not yield new ideas. The brain can only see what it is prepared to see (existing patterns)” De Bono (1995, p. 11)

Senge, et al. (1994) state that these self-generated beliefs about our world, or rather our experiences, go largely untested. Argyris' (1990) ' Ladder of Inference' (see fig ?) depicts the fact that, not only do we self-generate beliefs about our environment based on only partial evidence; but that we

continuously strive to uphold these beliefs by deselecting contrary information (see ‘ the reflexive loop’).

The ‘ ladder of inference’ is helpful to a point, in that it illustrates the fact that, even our most stubborn beliefs, may be based upon a partial representation of the ‘ reality. It may therefore be helpful to use this model, or the underlying principle, with an individual or a group, in order to encourage a spirit of humble inquiry. However, the ladder omits the fact that we may also adopt beliefs based on second-hand information – perhaps owing to a particularly persuasive portrayal by somebody of a particular incident; or because a group has developed a high level of cohesion . Janis (1972) referred to this dynamic as Groupthink,

“...a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action”. Janis, I. L. (1972, p. 9)

Janis observed that, in such cases, group members can be influenced to operate contrary to their better judgment – even when the group’s decision or behaviour is in opposition to personally held beliefs and values. I would argue against any notion that Groupthink is akin to ‘ trust’ within teams. In fact, in some cases, Groupthink may be the result of a lack of trust – a fear of punishment or rejection. However, the superficial impression may have more than a passing resemblance to ‘ trust’. In such instances, group cohesion and connectivity, can be damaging to the overall ability of a team to achieve its aims,

“... the ability of the group to stay connected and informed about each other’s work would be expected to have a positive impact on the group’s level of cohesion, efficacy, and potency. Yet, staying connected may also have a negative impact to the extent that information is rapidly transmitted about all of the problem areas in a group” Aviolo, B. Et al (2000, p. 660)

Critically, where a team or group is exhibiting Groupthink, or else, transmitting negative beliefs between colleagues; there is an apparent lack of personal accountability for achievement of the shared-goal. Trust however, results in inter-personal openness,

“ In all cases, trust was very closely tied to perceptions of organizational openness” Thomas, et al (2009, p. 306)

In my own experience, a spirit of inter-team trust and openness, yields constructive challenge, divergent thinking and co-creation. This is vital if teams are to rid themselves of out-dated or erroneous assumptions and beliefs,

“ All too often we are inclined to recapitulate prevalent thinking rather than to search for new directions or redefine our commonly held views and knowledge” Tillema, H. (2006, p. 173)

The following extract from Senge et al’s (1994,) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, provides a helpful illustration of how subjective interpretations, coupled with a lack of openness, can result in cross-purposes and misunderstandings,



“ I am standing before the executive team, making a presentation. They all seem engaged and alert, except for Larry, at the end of the table, who seems bored out of his mind. He turns his dark, morose eyes away from me and puts his hand to his mouth. He doesn’t ask any questions until I’m almost done, when he breaks in: “ I think we should ask for a full report.” In this culture, that typically means, “ Let’s move on.” Everyone starts to shuffle their papers and put their notes away. Larry obviously thinks that I’m incompetent — which is a shame, because these ideas are exactly what his department needs. Now that I think of it, he’s never liked my ideas. Clearly, Larry is a power-hungry jerk. By the time I’ve returned to my seat, I’ve made a decision: I’m not going to include anything in my report that Larry can use. He wouldn’t read it, or, worse still, he’d just use it against me. It’s too bad I have an enemy who’s so prominent in the company.” Senge (1994, p p. 243)

It is relatively easy for a dispassionate reader to spot the hasty assumptions being formulated in this extract. This however, does not alter the fact that, given the right (or wrong) set of circumstances, where our fight or flight mechanism has been engaged, we may all be prone to this process of thinking and judging.

In order to generate shared knowledge, understanding or meaning; we need inter-subjectivity – the sharing of subjective states by multiple individuals (Scheff, et al., 2006).

“ Knowledge productivity requires that implicit beliefs and conceptions be challenged and open to external debate in order to become relevant for

professional action. This occurs only when they can be communicated and shared with others.”

However, this is not merely a case of multiple contributors providing a description of an event as they experienced it, whilst others listen – although this is certainly part of it. Rather, as Bohm (1996) suggests, this is a process of collaborative creation,

“...in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something in common, i. e. creating something new together” Bohm (1996, p. 3)

This of course is no easy thing – certainly where time is scarce, or where a group is unfamiliar with one another and trust has not yet formed. According to Senge, et al. (1994, p. 242), our basic paradigm can be characterised thus:

- \* Our beliefs are the truth
- \* The truth is obvious
- \* Our beliefs are based on real data
- \* The data we select are the real data

In order to open minds – and principally our own mind – sufficient to affect a shift or transformation in position or belief requires a particular mindset. The methodology used to generate, or create, shared knowledge and meaning

therefore, must give attention to establishing conditions wherein participants are able to enter and contribute as sincere learners,

“ To a visitor who described

himself as a seeker after

Truth the Master said, “ If

what you seek is Truth,

there is one thing you must

have above all else.”

“ I know. An overwhelming

passion for it.”

“ No. An unremitting readiness

to admit you may be wrong.”

De Mello (1989, p. 78)

### **Collaborative Enquiry**

Collaborative inquiry involves sharing ideas and individual strengths by enhancing interactive questioning, investigation, and learning. In collaborative learning communities professionals discuss, study, and construct conceptual principles and ideas. They generate and enact new strategies for their work environment, and above all share insights about what they learn (Tillema, 2005),

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“ Collaborative inquiry, or co-inquiry, is the ability to dialogue within and across community boundaries. It involves cycles of action and reflection, and thus promotes learning. Co-inquiry invites loyal skepticism, challenging questions, and a plurality of perspectives.” Palus and Horth (2005, p. 5)

These ideas conform with Lave and Wenger’s (date) Communities of practice.

“... groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.” Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002, p. 4)

These communities too require a focus on shared interests, joint activities, and a shared repertoire of resources (i. e. experiences, stories, tools, solutions, etc), to frame knowledge in a form of collaborative inquiry.

Knowledge about a system is developed through ‘ collegial interaction’, not just from reading about documented processes or policies. Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). The exciting thing about this type of learning is that it is situated in the ‘ practice’, therefore the benefits of new knowledge and meaning are immediately realised,

“ Knowledge is created, shared, organized, revised, and passed on within and among these communities. In a deep sense, it is by these communities that knowledge is ‘ owned’ in practice”. Wenger, E (1998, p?)

Furthermore, because these communities function as an informal network of people, drawn together by dint of shared interests and concerns – rather

than having been assembled by top-down directive; any inquiry that takes place is focused upon where there is a shared interest, or energy. In this sense, the inquiry is generated from within the community. This, I think, has important ramifications for the authenticity of the learning that results.

Storberg-Walker (2008) has rejected notions that Communities of Practice can be universally applied and, further, claims that, although Communities of Practice theory offers valuable insights into learning, meaning, identity, and practice; the theory itself does not withstand serious scrutiny. Additionally, Cox (2005) questions the applicability of the concept of informal learning communities, to the heavily individualised and tightly managed work of the twenty-first century. In a more recent work, Wenger, with McDermott and Snyder (2002), recommends that managers foster informal horizontal groups across organisational boundaries. However, whilst this suggestion perhaps represents a potentially useful knowledge management tactic; there is a delicate line that exists between ‘fostering’ these communities and a conspicuous attempt to ‘manage’ or ‘controls’ them. When we introduce ‘management’ to Communities of Practice, we introduce formal measures, structures, roles and inducements. In this sense, we lose or diminish ‘citizenship’; the very essence and power of Communities of Practice, as originally defined by Wenger (1998).

When organisational conditions permit it, Communities of Practice contribute to the development of social capital. This is an organisation’s wealth that exists because of individual relationships and connections (Lesser, 2000); a stock of trust, personal networks and a sense of community (Cohen & Prusak, 2001). Wenger (1998) believed that Communities of Practice evolve

(see fig. ?) – that the nature of the interactions would change over time and through experience; as would the strength and value of the connections.

Active

Members engage in developing a practice

Coalescing

Members come together and recognise their potential

Dispersed

Members no longer engage very intensely, but the community is still alive as a force and a centre of knowledge

Potential

People face similar situations without the benefit of a shared practice

Memorable

The community is no longer central, but people still remember it as a significant part of their identities

Typical Activities

Engaging in joint activities, creating artifacts, adapting to changing circumstances, renewing interest, commitment, and relationships

Exploring connectedness, defining joint enterprise, negotiating community

Staying in touch, communicating, holding reunions, calling for advice

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Finding each other, discovering commonalities

Telling stories, preserving artefacts, collecting memorabilia

This is a useful framework with which to consider the commencement of a collaborative inquiry. When viewed in this context, the inquiry is less about an isolated research question, and more about the commencement of an ongoing cross-functional dialogue. As I consider this in relation to the terms of my research methodology, my aim becomes clearer. Again, I am no longer seeking to answer a particular question – at least not in isolation; I am seeking to facilitate the first three stages of development of Community of Practice – namely: (i) Potential, (ii) Coalescing, and (iii) Active.

Open Space Technology (incomplete)

“ Fostering co-inquiry within your organization means setting up an environment that feeds creative exchange and collaborative learning.” Palus & Horth (2005, p. 5)

“ Hailed for its utter simplicity — and it’s power, Open Space starts with open-minded leadership, an issue that really matters, and an invitation to co-create something new and amazing. What happens in the meetings is high learning, high play and high productivity, but is never pre-determined. And what emerges, over time, is a truly inviting organisation, that will thrive in times of swirling change”, Herman (1998)

### **My Methodology (incomplete)**

This section contains an account of the method that I followed in order to conduct my research.

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“ In the final analysis, the right way to do Open Space will be what works for you. Experience has shown that any individual with a good head and a good heart can achieve satisfactory results. Owen (1997, p. 20)

### **Stage 1: Invitation**

Owen (1997) states that only the people who ‘ care’ about the issues that you’re hoping to explore should attend an Open Space event,

“ If we only did what we cared to do, not much would get done. Or would it? Isn’t it true that jobs done by people who don’t care are not worth a whole lot? Is it not also true that that people who care greatly accomplish incredible things” Owen (1997, p. 20)

Whilst I think there is a risk to accepting this statement indiscriminately – People who ‘ care greatly’ sometimes accomplish very little too; I was anxious to also demonstrate my own openness and trust (both in the process and the people) by appealing to concerned volunteers. In doing so, I thought about a number of individuals who, I believed, should be involved, but that probably would not volunteer themselves. But I was struck by the following injunction,

“... Open Space can only fail for two reasons: if people show up with no passion and/ or if somebody tries to control the process in order to achieve some sort of pre-determined outcome(s).” Herman (1998)

In addition, Shaw (2002) states that acting without a clear outcome in mind is not the same as acting randomly without intention. This point helps to define the ‘ open’ in Open Space. Open Space is about discovering, or



opening to our awareness, possibilities. This idea runs contrary to conventional wisdom about working effectively. Covey (1998), for instance, made himself and his publishers extremely wealthy by counseling us all to “begin with the end in mind” Covey (1998, p. 95). However, the more that we focus on the end result, and the more detail that we add to our sense of a desired outcome; the fewer options that remain available to us. For this reason, Open Space Technology ‘begins with a question in mind’.

My invitation therefore included a basic description of the issue that I wanted to invite people to explore and a few high-level questions to give the event further definition. My method of advertising this event utilised two channels:

(1) Posters inside and outside the conference rooms at the two head office sites.

(2) A ‘bulletin’ on the organisation’s intranet homepage with a link to the invitation on the organisation’s Learning Management System.

The invitation was open to all staff, irrespective of hierarchy and was worded as an opportunity to contribute to the creation of practical solutions (see below):

Dear Colleagues,

You’re invited to take part in an inquiry into Trust and Openness in our teams here at YBS.

We all use a variety of technologies to ‘ stay in touch’ with one another, e. g. Email, mobile phone, voice mail, text messaging, instant messaging, Sharepoint – also, social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, etc.

These tools make it possible for us to communicate with people who may be working on multiple projects and tasks, across a number of different offices and buildings – even the humble post-it note is a form of technology that helps us to manage our communication with people who are not physically proximate.

However, I’m interested in the impact that these technologies – or rather, the working practices that have evolved alongside them – have on the amount of trust and openness we have within our teams? Are we overly reliant upon these technologies? Do we actually communicate less because of them? Are we always selective in our methods of communication – or do we follow habit?

The event will take the form of a number of small discussion groups, the specific agenda for which will be set by participants at the start of the day – each discussion group will be focused upon achieving fresh understanding and practical outcomes, both for the organisation and the individual. If you’d like to be a part of this, please show up promptly at:

09: 30 to 16: 30

on Monday the 16th November

**in Conference Rooms 3&4 (Yorkshire Drive)**

If you are unable to commit to the entire day, but would still like to play some part in this inquiry, you're welcome to come along for the opening of the event and contribute for as long as you're able.

Alternatively, if you are unable to attend, but would like a member of your team to be part of it, feel free to pass on this invitation. The only condition here is that people attend because they want to. The effectiveness of this sort of event hinges upon there being a group of people who have chosen to be there.

If you have any further questions about this event, please get in contact with me.

**Stage 2: Climate**

"...reaching knowledge productivity in professional learning is to a large extent dependent on the arrangement of learning environments that stimulate professionals to develop, exchange and communicate their knowledge". Tillema, H. (2006, p. 174)

" Knowledge productivity requires that implicit beliefs and conceptions be challenged and open to external debate in order to become relevant for professional action. This occurs only when they can be communicated and shared with others." Tillema (2005)

**Stage 3: Set-up****Stage 4: Facilitation and Data Gathering/ Capturing****Stage 5: Closing****Stage 6: Data Analysis**

“ Mauthner and Doucet (1998 cited in Elliot 2007) point to the fact that there is not nearly as much written on how to analyse qualitative data as there is on how to collect it. They argue that:

“...it is important for researchers to become more methodologically explicit about the ‘ nitty-gritty’ of the analytic process” (ibid. p. 158)

They suggest multiple readings of the transcripts be done to cover plot, the storyteller, relationships and the broader social context. What is also of great importance is that the reader reads, with their own response in mind, in this case meaning I read and note and broaden my awareness of my response to the texts. Four questions that must be answered are:

1. What do we notice?
2. Why do we notice what we notice?
3. How can we interpret what we notice?
4. How can we know that our interpretation is the right one?”

**Critique of the Research Methodology**

As I reflect upon the methodology that I employed in order to answer my research question, I have identified a number of issues that, I think, may have affected the quality and trustworthiness of the overall research

findings. Some of these were inside of my control and some were as a result of issues that, at the time, I could have had little foresight of.

\* I had intended to issue an open invite to the Open Space event so as to ensure that only concerned volunteers were in attendance. However, upon reflection, I see that – either consciously or unconsciously – I found myself talking to people whom I know to be supportive of me and my work, about this event. If I'm honest, I think that I did this out of concern for myself, rather than for the good of the research. As it turned out, a high percentage of these people did 'volunteer' their time to contribute to this event. And whilst I'm comforted that not everybody that I spoke to came to the event, it is impossible to know, of those that did show up, which were genuinely interested in the issue at hand?

\* The topic of trust and openness coincided, albeit inadvertently, with a major organisational project. At that point, only certain employees were privy to the details of the project and they had each signed a confidentiality agreement. Despite the best efforts to keep the project secret however, speculation was rife throughout the organisation – largely due to the number of senior staff who had been rendered unavailable for business-as-usual activity. Present at the Open Space event were both staff who had signed the agreement and staff who had not. Throughout the event there was a palpable sense of there being two camps – albeit the 'those in the know' camp was significantly the smaller of the two. When people were describing trust and openness, I believe that, in some instances, this issue took precedent over the issue that I had planned to research. In the interests of integrity with respect to Open Space however, I chose not to intervene or

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attempt to engineer discussion to the topic at hand. If anything, I believe that this revealed a new dimension of ‘ remoteness’ to rank alongside time, space and organisation. This point will be further reviewed in the ‘ discussion of research findings’ section (to follow).

\* As I review the invitation that I created for the Open Space event, I can see an obvious bias that I ought to have surfaced and declared from the outset. My hypothesis from the beginning of this inquiry has been that; for all of the benefits and convenience that we derive from remote communication technologies, we pay a price in terms of a reduction in trust and openness within our teams. I think that I could have made this more explicit in the invitation. Although, I was conscientious in explaining this during the introduction of the actual event.

\* Although the invitation to participate in the Open Space event was open to all staff, very few non-management staff attended. This raises questions about (a) the comprehensiveness of the research findings, (b) the extent to which non-management staff feel empowered to contribute in such an event, and (c) the extent to which non-management staff trust the organisation enough to feel safe enough to self-disclose on such a platform.

\* The Open Space event took place at one of the head office buildings. This automatically excluded the majority of the organisation’s branch staff. Again, this raises questions about the comprehensiveness of the research findings. This is a particular irony because branch staff are wholly reliant upon remote communication technologies for developing and maintaining relationships with colleagues in Head Office and throughout the branch network. This also

presents an opportunity however for a future research – ‘ an inquiry into the effect of remote communication technologies on remote workers’, conducted through the medium of remote communication technologies – e. g. webinar.

### **Research Findings (incomplete)**

Session 1/ Group 1

Discussion Topic/ Question

“ I think we all secretly like working in silo from each other – do you agree or disagree – and if so, Why?”

Summary of Content

- \* Yes – working in silo gives you a sense of freedom
- \* Yes – working in silo means that you can make decisions more quickly (sometimes it’s better to do something and then inform people that you’ve done it)
- \* Yes – to defend against other teams who are in open competition with us
- \* Yes – My objectives are all individual, I don’t have time to be ‘ teamy’ and achieve my objectives.
- \* Yes – It’s simpler
- \* Yes – You not exposed that way
- \* Yes – otherwise you end up with decisions by committee
- \* Yes – Best way