

# Phenomenology as a research design in Public Administration

## Fitness for purpose

X Thani

Department of Public Administration and Management

University of South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

In recent times research in Public Administration has been dominated by popular research methodologies and designs. Phenomenology as a research design has received limited exposure in the discipline. Therefore the purpose of this article is to determine the importance of phenomenology as a credible research design in Public Administration research. This article first provides an extensive literature overview of the popular research methods in South African Public Administration. A brief history of the origin of phenomenology as a research method and a work definition of phenomenology are given. Subsequently, a case for phenomenology is critically discussed to highlight the importance and application of this research design based on a theoretical foundation. The literature consists of published articles, books and phenomenological journals. The article concludes that a justification for the use of phenomenology in certain types of research is necessary.

The article also argues that consultative approaches and public participation have been encouraged since the first democratic elections in South Africa. Considering the nature of this discipline, it is important to effect changes in the ways research is conducted to comply with practical policy requirements. Research within a phenomenological framework will assist public administrators in solving many societal problems.

### INTRODUCTION

Research can be used as a reflective tool to improve scholarship in any discipline. There are various research designs that can be applied when conducting research.

Cameron (2008:62) writes that the Public Administration field has not progressed intellectually since the early 1990s. In addition Cameron and Milne (2009:391) criticise Public Administration scholars for their reliance on what they call "desktop research and/or secondary research". One can assume that the lack of progress is due to non-applicable methodologies and research designs used by Public Administration researchers. It is necessary to acknowledge that there are various research designs used by Public Administration researchers. Such research designs can employ either quantitative or qualitative research methodologies. In the context of qualitative research methodologies, the German philosopher Husserl coined the concept *phenomenology*. Some scholars deem phenomenology to be more applicable to philosophical disciplines. The phenomenological method of deriving knowledge forms a central part of transcendental phenomenology, which is concerned with the world as it presents itself to us as humans (Willig 2008:57). Husserl (in Willig 2008:53) suggests that it is "possible to transcend presuppositions and biases and to experience a state of pre-reflective consciousness, which allows us to describe phenomena as they present themselves to us". Morcol (2005:1) stipulates that Public Administration theorists "should include the embodiment of human knowledge in their theories". The embodiment of such knowledge requires the use of phenomenology. In the South African context, Auriacombe (2006) acknowledges phenomenology as one of the research designs within the qualitative research paradigm. The failure of Auriacombe and Mouton (2007) to expand on the importance of phenomenology emphasises the importance of further critical research. While Schurink's (2009) contribution to the subject is fundamental, he discusses phenomenology without providing a clear outline of how this research design can be applied to Public Administration research. The types of research topics chosen by Public Administration researchers evidently prove the importance of phenomenology.

Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are promoted in the Public Administration discipline, and researchers in the discipline often use these methodologies (Thani and Wessels 2011; Wessels 2010; Auriacombe 2009; Wessels, Pauw and Thani 2009). In the South African Public Administration field, phenomenology as a research design in qualitative research methodology has recently received limited exposure. In view of the possible insight this approach can bring to the field, it deserves more attention and should not be neglected. Such neglect could possibly be the reason why researchers conduct irrelevant research for the use of practitioners to consider in their decision-making process. Practitioners, including policymakers and decision-makers, are often criticised for their failure to implement policies that solve societal problems. More often than not they rely on academic institutions to conduct research for them. Wright, Manigault and Black (2004:747) assert that research in Public Administration does not only guide theory, but also influences

managers' and policymakers' decisions. If a less applicable research design is used, the final product will be questionable.

This article serves as a call to Public Administration researchers to use appropriate research methods with applicable research designs. After conducting an extensive literature review, the author of this article concluded that it is necessary to use phenomenology as a research design in Public Administration.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF REPORTED RESEARCH METHODS IN SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

To understand the research methods used in Public Administration it is necessary to define Public Administration and to provide an overview of some kinds of research conducted in this field. Public Administration in general studies how the government functions and scrutinises the activities of the government. Public Administration researchers evaluate programmes and policies as part of their research. Their research requires them to study people and to read policy documents. The people that are studied can be either the policymakers or members of the general public who are affected by the policy. This requires creativity and the use of appropriate research methods with applicable research designs. It is evident that researchers in this field use various research methods. As already highlighted in the introduction of this article, researchers in the public administration field use both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Auriacombe and Mouton (2007:441) argue that qualitative field research is important in Public Administration because it uses statistical techniques to understand people rather than to explain their behaviour. In their article they criticise quantitative research, which is associated with experiments and/or surveys. They emphasise that qualitative research methods enable researchers to see the social world through the eyes of others. Considering the nature of Public Administration, one can agree with Auriacombe and Mouton that it is of paramount importance that researchers conduct qualitative field research in order to understand people's views and/or opinions and phenomena. Auriacombe and Mouton (2007:444–447) discuss more research designs in the qualitative research approach, such as ethno-methodology, grounded theory, case study designs, institutional ethnography and participatory action research. However, they fail to include phenomenology in their discussion, perhaps because its importance in the field has not been realised.

Cloete (2007:513) contends that the quantitative research method refers to "objectively observable, measurable and calculable phenomena and it employs a narrow range of technical, statistical and mathematical approaches". He further highlights the importance of qualitative research by asserting that

it subjectively interprets "logic, values, meanings, attitudes, emotional driving forces ...." (Cloete 2007:513). Moreover, phenomenology is mentioned as an example, with no further discussion of it as a design. Auriacombe (2007:459) also provides and discusses examples of unobtrusive research methods, namely content analysis; analysis of existing statistics and data; and historical or comparative analysis. Her research shows that content analysis helps the researcher turn qualitative analysis into quantitative data, making it possible to "perform additional statistical tests on the material". Thani (2009) uses content analysis as research method when analysing 54 doctoral theses for the purposes of her research project and in doing so verifies Auriacombe's findings. She identifies various categories and uses a chi-square statistical method to determine the relationship between the variables. Auriacombe (2006:465) clarifies the historical/comparative analysis method and argues that it aims to discover common patterns that occur at different times and in different places. Understanding the history of a particular event and institution is also important in Public Administration.

Webb and Auriacombe (2006:591) discuss various methodological research designs available to Public Administration researchers in terms of qualitative and quantitative approaches. They claim that there are experimental and quasi experimental research designs in the quantitative research approach. In the qualitative research approach there are research designs such as biography, ethnographic studies, grounded theory, case studies and phenomenological studies. Webb and Auriacombe (2006:591) argue that in phenomenological studies the researcher seeks to understand how other people perceive the world. These two authors only write very briefly about this design. In their discussion of the various types of data, Mouton, Auriacombe and Lutabingwa (2006:580) highlight the importance of qualitative data and quantitative data as data collection methods. This implies that these two types of data can be used for qualitative and quantitative research studies following a mixed method approach. When discussing the importance of quantitative (data) analysis and solutions, Croucamp (2009:885) also emphasises that statistical software for the social sciences such as SPSS needs to be prescribed as a module in postgraduate curricula.

Cloete (2006:682) argues that it is necessary to conduct evaluation research in Public Administration. He describes evaluation research as "determining whether a social intervention, policy, or programme has produced or not produced the intended result" and explains that it is not a research method, but a type of research. Wessels, Pauw and Thani (2009:15) classify evaluation research as a research approach focusing on programme evaluation and policy analysis. Schurink (2009:814) highlights and discusses the research designs in the qualitative research approach, such as ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and case study. When describing the phenomenology research

design, Schurink (2009:812) states that the research aims at understanding the experiences of the participants. In order to gain a greater understanding of participants in a study, the researcher needs to use interviews and participant observation as data collection methods. Schurink briefly discusses the phenomenology research design and compares it to other research designs. Wessels *et al.* (2009:15) provide a classification of research methods. They identify the following research methods: quantitative 1, quantitative 2, qualitative 1, qualitative 2, participatory action research, historical/narrative studies, conceptual analysis, hermeneutics, comparison and content analysis. However, they fail to discuss the applicability of these methods to Public Administration.

Auriacombe (2009:824) explains what grounded theory is. She argues that grounded theory "focuses on generating substantive theory based on the study of social situations leading to improved understanding of human behaviour and experience". Auriacombe argues that researchers often confuse grounded theory with qualitative research. Grounded theory is also new in Public Administration, but it can bring about a rewarding learning curve and enable Public Administration academics to develop their own theories. Cameron and Milne (2009:391) analyse a database of 383 articles and find that "most research was descriptive and normative and there was very little testing of validity or causality, very little systematic quantitative or qualitative research was carried out".

Thani and Wessels (2011) conducted an empirical study of appropriate methods for postgraduate researchers in Public Administration and Management. They identify four research methods that were used by doctoral students in the period 2000 to 2005, namely quantitative 1, qualitative 1, qualitative 2 and hermeneutics (Thani and Wessels 2011:82). During the above-mentioned period, students either studied people and their behaviour directly, or they used case studies or unstructured interviews and evaluated programme and policy analysis (Thani and Wessels 2011:78). This might mean that these postgraduate students were encouraged to use such methodologies by their supervisors. Wessels (2010) conducted an empirical study to determine whether there is a relationship between researchers' institutional affiliation and their selection of research methods in Public Administration. His findings differ from findings about doctoral candidates (see Thani and Wessels 2011), because researchers or lectures mainly use quantitative 1, quantitative 2, qualitative 1, qualitative 2, hermeneutics, participatory action, historical/narrative and conceptual analysis. It seems that researchers are encouraged or influenced to select specific research methods.

Based on the preceding discussions, the followings deductions are made with regard to the research methods proposed for Public Administration researchers:

Quantitative 1, qualitative 1, qualitative 2 and hermeneutics are mostly used by doctoral students (Thani and Wessels 2011).

- Quantitative 1, quantitative 2, qualitative 1, qualitative 2, hermeneutics, participatory action, historical/narrative and conceptual analysis are applied by academics or researchers in Public Administration (Wessels 2010).
- Qualitative research is more important than quantitative research in Public Administration and Management (Auriacombe and Mouton 2007).
- Quantitative and qualitative research methods are used (Cloete 2007; Webb and Auriacombe 2006; Croucamp 2009).
- Unobtrusive research methods can also be considered for Public Administration research (Auriacombe 2006).
- Qualitative data and quantitative data (Mouton *et al* 2006).
- Grounded theory (Auriacombe 2009).
- The use of various methods (Wessels *et al.* 2009).

Most of the academics in the literature reviewed agree about the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods in Public Administration research. When writing about these methods, some authors acknowledge that there are various research methods in each research design. For example, Webb and Auriacombe (2006) mention experimental and quasi experimental research designs in the quantitative research approach. In the qualitative approach, various research designs such as ethnography and case studies are mentioned. As already discussed, phenomenology as a research method gets limited exposure in Public Administration. After the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, people were encouraged to express their views without any fear. Section 195 of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996, highlights the basic values and principles governing public administration. It emphasises that "people's needs must be responded to, and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy-making". Phenomenology can encourage people to steer the policy-making process to some extent.

Before we discuss the case for the use of phenomenology as a research method in Public Administration, it is important to provide a general definition of this research design.

## **ORIGINS OF PHENOMENOLOGY**

Husserl (8 April 1859 – 26 April 1938) was the founder of the school of phenomenology. He was a German philosopher (Hughes and Wesley). Embree (2001:2) acknowledges that phenomenology began late in the 1890s. This research method is dominant in philosophy because Husserl thought that "the world means a world experienced and made meaningful by acts of consciousness". In science, conclusions and proposals are influenced by everyday

experience. Embree (2001:3) acknowledges that this research method is spreading to "non-philosophical disciplines". Embree further explains that phenomenology received more attention during the 1940s and 1950s in South Africa. Although Embree does not specify the disciplines influenced by phenomenology, one can safely assume that it spread to the philosophical disciplines. Embree classifies disciplines other than philosophy as "non-philosophical disciplines", and Public Administration can be regarded as a non-philosophical discipline. To promote scientific rigour, it is crucial to explore some research designs that can make a major contribution to Public Administration and Management. Psychology also frequently utilises phenomenology (Giorgi 1997).

Leedy and Ormrod (2001:153) define phenomenology as a "person's perception of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the event as it exists external to the person". Leedy and Ormrod (2001:153) argue that a phenomenological study aims to "understand people's perceptions of and perspectives on a particular occurrence, and the meaning they attach to the occurrence". For example, a researcher in Public Administration may want to conduct research on rural women in Mpumalanga to understand their perceptions of the empowerment of women and the various interventions they have witnessed. These women can define their everyday experience as it relates to the phenomena. The researcher can observe and listen to the construction of the participant. In other instances there is a possibility that the researcher has experienced that phenomena and now seeks to understand other people's perceptions of the same phenomena.

When defining phenomenology in the context of Public Administration, McNabb (2005:278) acknowledges that it "establishes meanings that social actors apply to events, works and symbols". For example, a researcher in Public Administration may conduct research on the personal experiences of unemployed postgraduate students. The main goal is to understand their experiences and perceptions of the problem of unemployment. This means that the researcher allows the participants to share their perceptions and then record them or take notes in order to present their perceptions as they are. This process can also involve recruiting companies and government departments.

## **A CASE FOR PHENOMENOLOGY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT**

When one sees the word *case*, one might wonder if it is necessary to make a case for phenomenology in Public Administration. The author of this article read articles published in South African accredited Public Administration journals from 2005 to 2011. In this time there was not a single article that discussed phenomenology exclusively in *Administratio Publica* and the *Journal*

*of Public Administration*. In 2006, Auriacombe included phenomenology as one of the research designs in the discipline and provided a brief description of it. Auriacombe and Mouton (2007) fail to justify the importance of phenomenology as a critical research design in the discipline. Schurink (2009) describes phenomenology in passing, but does not mention the importance of phenomenology as a credible research design in the discipline.

Why make a case for phenomenology in Public Administration? Thani and Wessels (2011:80) identify topics researched by Public Administration and Management doctoral students. The four research areas that are most often investigated include: public organisational development and management; human resource management; managing public service delivery; and policy analysis and management. In his article entitled "South African trends in master's and doctoral research in Public Administration", Wessels (2008) deduces that a high percentage of research is concentrated on two research topics: public service delivery; and human resource management. Considering the nature of research topics selected by Public Administration researchers and students, it is possible to recommend the use of phenomenology as a research design. Rather than relying on what Cameron and Milne (2009:392) call "desktop research or secondary research", Public Administration academics can contribute findings based on the real-world perceptions and experiences of affected people.

Morcol (2005:1) agrees that Public Administration theorists "should include the embodiment of human knowledge in their theories". Human knowledge derives from studies of human behaviour that aim to capture such knowledge. Studying human behaviour is more than filling in questionnaires, but implies understanding people's perceptions. Theorists can only gain knowledge when they are in touch with the real world. One may wonder in which research scenario this design can be more applicable than in the Public Administration context. Phenomenology in Public Administration can be applied during the planning or policy analysis stages. Hummel (1982:313) justifies this proposal by stipulating that phenomenology will assist in avoiding errors that are associated with incorrect assumptions of what human beings are and what they know. Hummel further points out the importance of taking proper account of people's values, because it can enhance policy evaluation. For example, a public administrator, researcher or lecturer wants to understand the perceptions of men about interventions aimed at empowering women. A researcher cannot decide that the participants involved are negative about a specific intervention; the researcher allows people to define their experiences and how they affected their real world. A different picture will emerge, because the researcher has not used a questionnaire where participants could select their experiences from a given list.

Goulding (2004:301) maintains that in phenomenology it is perceived that people's lives are socially constructed. Participants are selected only if they have



experienced the phenomenon under study. The experiences of the selected participants are taken as facts. Goulding (2004:301) further explains that the sampling method in phenomenology is purposive and the major method of data collection is interviews. One can agree with Goulding, because the selection of participants is not random; one has a specific purpose in mind when selecting or drawing a sample. It is necessary to have lengthy interviews to capture people's perceptions and their understanding of a certain occurrence. McNabb (2005:278) echoes Goulding (2004) by pointing out that the phenomenologist employs participant observation, interviews and recordings as methods of data collection. The researcher does not aim at interpreting the experiences or perceptions of the participants, but attempts to present them truthfully as they are. No wonder McNabb (2005:278) highlights that "the underlying concept of interest is the life history of individual persons".

Aspers (2004:5) presents his claim that the world needs to be studied as experienced. Aspers is of the opinion that the world is constructed and reconstructed by the people who live in it. In order to understand people's perceptions, it is necessary to communicate with them. Other researchers can argue that there is an objective reality. Edwards (2001:2) sees phenomenology as a creative way of studying the new world. He draws the reader's attention to the advantages of using phenomenology as a research design, namely that it suspends preconceptions and allows the lived world reality to reveal its true meaning. Some other designs can drive participants to say what the researcher wants, depending on the nature of questions that will be asked in the questionnaire. In contrast, phenomenology aims to remove that bias by allowing participants to share their experiences rather than influencing them to say what the researcher expects.

Willis (2001:3) argues that in phenomenology things are not accepted as they appear, but they become what they are because of perceptions and naming. This naming and the perceptions are influenced by many factors, including cultural and religious factors. People consciously construct the meaning of a certain phenomena as they experience it. For example, a student in a rural area may perceive technological facilities differently than a student from urban areas would. This differentiation occurs simply because the surroundings and the environment influence the different students' understanding and perceptions. It is safer to agree with the claim made by Aspers (2004) that the meaning of the individual world is socially constructed. Willis (2001:7) explains that phenomenology endeavours to objectivise subjectivity, "focusing on the thing being experienced but still as experienced by me – as apart from subjectivising subjectivity". Language plays a critical role in this regard. As science or research aspires to be as objective as possible, it makes sense that Willis (2001) should suggest that phenomenologist need to objectivise subjectivity.

Embree (2001:7) names six features that characterise the generic approach of phenomenology:

- It opposes accepting unobservable matters.
- It opposes naturalism.
- It justifies cognition, and also evaluation and even action.
- It considers ideal objects, such as numbers and propositions, but also universal essences to be observable or evident.
- Phenomenologists practise reflective observation of what can be called encountering (encountering of objects) and also of objects as they are encountered.

Embree's six features concur with the discussion above that phenomenology requires the researcher to observe the participants and evidence. The main data collection method that can be used is lengthy interviews that give participants an opportunity to express themselves. Dahlberg (2006:2) agrees that phenomenological studies sometimes require researchers to use observation rather than interviewing as a data collection technique. This author argues that we sometimes get too close to the phenomenon and miss important aspects that we should have observed. Each phenomenological researcher needs to think critically about the need to be close to or at a distance from the phenomena. This is a thought-provoking argument, because if the researcher is too distant, he or she may misinterpret what is observed. In a Public Administration context, observation as data collection method brings about challenges because, as government or public institutions change their policies and programmes, various experiences and perceptions are developed. In order to have access to evidence of "the real world", a researcher needs to communicate with the people who are affected positively or negatively by that specific intervention. It may be possible to follow Willis's approach of objectivising the subjective. Using observation as the only data collection technique can mean subjectivising the subjective. Researchers often realise that their perceptions are not necessarily true after engaging the participants and allowing them to share their perceptions or experience. In phenomenology it is somehow premature to say that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. What if that beauty needs more than to be beautiful? Willis (2004:3) asserts that in phenomenological studies it is important to ask questions such as: "What was it like?" and "How did you feel and what did you make of the experience?" For example, a lecturer in Public Administration may be asked about his or her experience when reading a paper at an international conference for the first time. This would mean interviewing more than one lecturer. Maybe the experiences are never the same. The researcher cannot conclude by mere observation that it was a wonderful experience. In order to get facts, the researcher should allow the lecturers to speak for themselves.

Willis (2004:10) strongly believes that the phenomenological approach "is still a worthy project in its attempt to return the things themselves and to attempt to create a feeling of understanding for a phenomenon".

Giorgi (2008:3) stipulates that phenomenological reduction refers to two elements: "(1) The researcher needs to consider bracketing personal past knowledge and all other theoretical knowledge not based on direct intuition; and (2) The researcher withholds the positing of the existence or reality of the object or state of affair that he or she is beholding". Giorgi explains that the researcher cannot make claims about what is observed. In order to return to the things themselves, as recommended by Willis (2004), researchers need evidence and facts from the objects or the participants.

From the above discussion it is possible to deduce the following about phenomenology:

- Phenomenology entails an understanding of people's perceptions, perspectives and meaning (Leedy and Ormrod 2001; Willis 2001; Giorgi 2008).
- People's perceptions and experiences are socially constructed (Goulding 2004; Aspers 2004).
- Phenomenologists use data collection methods such as lengthy interviews and recordings (McNabb 2005; Embree 2001; Dahlberg 2006).
- Phenomenology is a creative way of studying the world (Edwards 2001).

In one way or the other the above is relevant in Public Administration. As Edwards (2001) points out, researchers can opt to use a creative way to conduct research in Public Administration. Groenewald (2004:7) uses phenomenology in his doctoral thesis. The growing of talent and the contribution of cooperativeness were identified as phenomena. A purposive sampling method was used to select programme managers at higher education institutions in Gauteng. Lengthy interviews were conducted to allow the research participants to share their experiences. A snowball sampling method was used and the interviewees were asked to recommend someone who had a similar experience. Informed consent was used to assure that interviewees participated willingly and they could withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. Questions such as "How did you experience the joint educational venture?" and "What values if any have been derived from the collaborative effort?" were asked during the interview process. Groenewald (2004:12) argues that the research participants shared their "experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme". There are various ways that can be used to store information for the explication of data. These ways include, among others, memoing, field notes, recordings and audio records. When drawing the sample, programme managers and employers were included to avoid bias. This design must not be confused with grounded theory as it does not require any statistical analysis. It is believed

that in phenomenology researchers record experiences as they are. This process requires time because researchers need to consider listening to the recording more than once to ensure that they record the experience accurately. This is one way to illustrate how phenomenology can be used. Public administration researchers can decide and select the most suitable way to apply it.

## CONCLUSION

In this article an exploration of literature highlighted the need for the application of phenomenology in Public Administration research. It has become evident that quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are promoted in this field. These methodologies provide insight and valid results. Consultative approaches and public participation was encouraged in South Africa after the democratic elections in 1994. The only way to gather information from people is to allow them to tell about their experiences. Public Administration researchers need to consider changing their research designs and applying those that are aligned to the Constitution. This article does not conclude that research designs utilised are irrelevant, but it acknowledges that Public Administration researchers or academics can consider utilising phenomenology as a research design in order to influence and perhaps enhance decision-making at this time. This is achieved in the article by firstly discussing the prominent research method in the field. Secondly the article gives an historical overview of phenomenology. Thirdly a case is made for the use of phenomenology in public administration. Researchers in this field need to consider exploring phenomenology.

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## **AUTHOR'S CONTACT DETAILS**

Mrs Xolile C Thani  
Department of Public Administration and Management  
P O BOX 392  
UNISA  
0003  
Tel: 012 429 3948  
E-mail: thanixc@unisa.ac.za