

PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODS IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF SEXUALITY

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In this chapter, we review issues central to the use of phenomenological research methods in the psychological study of sexuality. Phenomenological methods are characterized by close attention to the details of participants' lived experience as well as an emphasis on participants' interpretation of their experience. This group of methods is essential in psychological research on sexuality because it helps researchers to understand the phenomenon of sexuality as it is experienced in everyday life and under constant change. Beginning with a summary of the epistemological foundations of phenomenological research methods in psychology, we present an overview of several popular approaches to data collection and analysis that facilitate phenomenological investigations of sexuality. Classical foundations, future directions, limitations, advantages, and clinical and policy relevance are discussed via key exemplar studies of sexuality-related phenomena using phenomenological research methods.

SEXUALITY AS COMPLEX AND VARIED PHENOMENA

Human sexuality is complex, given that it is inclusive of a number of related, but distinct, phenomena. These phenomena include, but are not limited to, sexual behavior, desire, pleasure, orientation, and identity. Psychologists and other social scientists often operationalize these aspects of sexuality categorically at the level of groups and populations to facilitate comparative study (e.g., heterosexual vs. sexual minority; penetrative vs. nonpenetrative sex).

However, within these groups and categories, psychological experiences of sexuality-related phenomena are enormously varied. For example, people vary greatly in the content and object of their sexual desires, hold complex and multiple sexual identity structures, imbue their own and others' sexual behaviors with subjective meanings, and become energized to engage in sexual behavior by diverse motivations (see Chapters 10, 19, 20, and 25, this volume). In addition to this high degree of interpersonal or within-group variability, there is also a great deal of intrapersonal variability in the psychological experience of sexuality. As people develop over time and move between social contexts, their psychological experiences of sexuality often follow suit. Thus, for any given person, sexual desires, identities, behaviors, and motives may change from one moment to the next. With all of these variations in mind, researchers are tasked with developing and using methods that are able to adequately capture the diversity of individuals' psychological experiences of sexuality, including the multitude of dimensions within the experience of sexuality.

In addition, pressing clinical concerns in the area of sexuality require both a nuanced understanding of people's subjective meanings of their experience of sexuality and an identification of possible ways to intervene (see Volume 2, Chapter 4, this handbook). For example, researchers have addressed a number of issues, including the following with which we have engaged in our own research: how same-sex couples negotiate experiences of stigma and intimacy within long-term romantic relationships (Frost, 2011b), what motivations gay men have for seeking

partners of the same HIV status (Frost, Stirratt, & Ouellette, 2008), how women's experiences of their sexuality align with contemporary survey measures of sexual function (McClelland, 2012), and how young adults experience and define their own sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2011). In the domain of sexuality, it is increasingly important to consider the clinical applications of psychological research, given that findings from studies are often quickly applied to questions of diagnosis and treatment. For example, understanding diverse experiences within diagnostic categories (Tiefer, 2002) and attending to the subjective evaluation of sexual experiences are concerns for those working close to the interface between sexuality, health, and well-being (see Chapters 11 and 13, this volume). These and similar research and therapeutic questions begin with the proposition that variability and complexity in the subjective experience of sexuality are not simply unexplainable error variance but matters worthy of investigation and explanation in their own right.

Thus, faced with the sometimes daunting complexity inherent in the psychological experience of sexuality, researchers and clinicians need to engage with methodological approaches that are specifically designed to investigate individuals' experiences and interpretations of their sexuality. These methods stand in contrast to other methods that might, for example, address the frequency or type of sexual behaviors but not examine someone's rationale for engaging in behaviors, record an individual's current sexual identity but not explore the development of that identity, or collect individuals' articulations of sexual desire but without a focus on the social and historical limitations imposed on some individuals speaking about their desire. In this chapter, we discuss these approaches—broadly categorized as *phenomenological approaches*—to the psychological study of sexuality. Before delving further into an overview of phenomenological epistemologies and methods in psychology, we provide a brief overview of why understanding the complexities and subjective lived experiences of sexuality-related phenomena is important. These insights are, we argue, essential not only for improved basic social scientific knowledge of human sexuality but for understanding and improving people's health and well-being and informing sexuality-related social policies (see Chapter 22, this volume; Volume 2, Chapter 8, this handbook).

STAKES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON SEXUALITY-RELATED PHENOMENA

Sexuality is an area that has historically been of interest to local and federal policymakers (Foucault, 1976/1998) and is often one in which politics and social norms play an important role in people's lives. Sexuality-related social policies are at times designed to exert social control over sexual bodies and behaviors and are often intended to extend the sexual morals of some individuals and groups with legislative authority to all individuals (for an in-depth review of psychological concerns related to social policy and sexuality, see Volume 2, Chapter 10, this handbook). Alternatively, sexuality-related social policies are also extended in order to distribute social resources, such as education, protections against harms, and equal rights.

State and federal policies directed at sexual behaviors, relationships, education, and health have enormous ramifications in people's lives. Policymakers often rely on research to help guide decisions, interventions, and laws that aim to protect groups and equitably distribute resources. Psychological research in the field of sexuality has often been influential in shaping and changing social policies related to sexual health, sexual rights, and sexual behaviors (see Volume 2, Chapters 8 and 10, this handbook). Researchers have consistently provided data concerning individuals' sexual development, experiences, relationships, and health—data that are important in the formation of policies surrounding topics such as the legal recognition of same-sex relationships (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007), sex education in schools (Fine & McClelland, 2006, 2007; see Volume 2, Chapter 11, this handbook), and abortion rights (Major et al., 2000). Sexual relationships, in particular, have historically been an area of state regulation and prohibition, as witnessed in three specific examples of laws and policies enacted over the past half-century: (a) laws prohibiting interracial marriage (antimiscegenation laws, e.g., *Loving v. Virginia*, 1967), (b) same-sex marriage (the Defense of Marriage Act, 1996), and (c) the U.S. military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy (Policy Concerning Homosexuality in the Armed Forces, 2006) that prohibited people who "demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual

acts” from serving in the armed forces of the United States. Although enforced through different policy mechanisms, each of these laws has aimed to control who can have sex with whom, the contexts in which sex is valued or devalued, and the consequences of engaging in sex that is deemed immoral (see Volume 2, Chapter 10, this handbook).

The enactment of policies pertaining to sexuality brings about a need to understand how people’s lives are affected when their sexual identity, intimate relationships, or sexual behaviors are defined as problematic and subsequently stigmatized. Phenomenological research—via its focus on subjective interpretations of lived experience—has the potential to illustrate complex variability in the negative consequences of limiting and discriminatory policy or to demonstrate the need for new policies that support the well-being of individuals left out of existing policies (Frost & Ouellette, 2011). For example, the Defense of Marriage Act has prevented many same-sex couples from obtaining legal recognition for their relationships, thereby reinforcing a marginalized social status for their relationships and excluding them from full participation in society (Frost, 2011a; Herdt & Kertzner, 2006). In spite of these numerous and severe forms of social devaluation and discrimination, many same-sex couples are able to have personally meaningful relationships that are both healthy and rewarding. By focusing on the experiences of same-sex couples through phenomenological investigation, psychologists are able to better understand how policies are perceived (e.g., threats vs. challenges to their relationships), the moments in their lives when policies exert the most (and least) influence, and the nuanced social creativity individuals exercise to circumvent delimiting social structures that seek to control their sexualities (e.g., community commitment ceremonies in lieu of formal legal recognition; Frost, 2011b, 2011c; Frost & Ouellette, 2011).

These examples provide a brief insight into several important characteristics of sexuality research and methods. In sum, phenomenological methods are able to contribute three elements to the study of sexuality: (a) the acknowledgment of the enormous variability in individuals’ intimate and sexual experiences and their interpretations of these experiences;

(b) the recognition of consistently high stakes in sexuality research, including applications in clinical, medical, and policy settings; and (c) attention to the diversity of sexual experiences as well as the patterns and meanings that exist within and between people. It is at the crossroads of these three elements that phenomenological methods sit.

OVERVIEW OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

In its broadest sense, phenomenological psychology is concerned with the study of the subjective meanings of lived experience (e.g., Giorgi, 1997; Smith, 2004; Wertz, 2005). Its roots lie primarily in the philosophies of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology (e.g., Husserl, 1977), Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) phenomenology of perception, and the existential phenomenological philosophies of Martin Heidegger (1927/1962) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1943), and they have given rise to clinical and empirically oriented approaches in psychology. For extensive historical and epistemological reviews, see Langdridge (2007) and Giorgi (2010a, 2010b).

In its traditional formulations, one major focus of phenomenology and its use in psychology has been the description of consciousness and the mechanisms underlying consciousness (Giorgi, 1997, 2006). Phenomenology assumes that consciousness is not entirely biological but is produced through subjective perception and mutually constituted intersubjectivities—with a specific focus on the intersubjective experience between one who perceives and one being perceived (Giorgi, 1997, 2006). Researchers and clinicians are thus able to gain insight into the meanings of a singular experience by describing the subjective nature of that experience as relayed through patients’ or participants’ reflective talk or textual data. Through reflection, therefore, a description of any given phenomenon can be produced.

Phenomenological approaches in psychology have grown to incorporate hermeneutic traditions from other related branches of psychology, such as humanistic psychology (Klein & Westcott, 1994). The inclusion of hermeneutics (i.e., ways of interpretation; see Dilthey, 1977; Gadamer, 1975)

expanded the boundaries of phenomenological psychology by moving the focus of research beyond description toward the meanings that individuals make out of lived experiences. In other words, with the addition of hermeneutic approaches, phenomenological psychology has grown to include both description and analysis of participants' accounts of their experiences.

This linking of descriptive elements provided by participants with analytic elements is what sets phenomenological methods apart from the larger category of qualitative methods. Although qualitative and phenomenological methods share a commitment to description as a powerful way of understanding a phenomenon, qualitative methods are a more inclusive and broader category. For example, qualitative methods, on one hand, may generate descriptive data from various sources other than a participant (e.g., ethnographic descriptions provided by a researcher or interviews with friends and family of a participant), may produce limited responses from participants that are light on description (e.g., an open-ended survey question), and may contain only descriptive elements that do not include analytic elements (e.g., describing elements of a participant's daily routine). Phenomenological methods, on the other hand, prioritize the viewpoint of the subject or participant, often use qualitative data collection methods to better understand this viewpoint, and additionally use analysis strategies (described later) to examine the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which the data emerged.

The combination of analytical and descriptive aims has been of particular importance in the psychological study of sexuality. Possibilities were opened to not solely describe sexual phenomena, such as sexual identity, sexual satisfaction, and intimacy, but also to compare experiences of phenomena across individuals and from one point in time to the next and, perhaps most important, describe how changes across time were experienced by individuals. In addition, as participants' interpretations of their own experience were increasingly treated as meaningful data, researchers' interpretations were increasingly considered meaningful. This inclusion of multiple perspectives on participant-generated

descriptions and analysis has resulted in an area of rich psychological theory and empirical work, particularly for feminist psychologists (see Josselson, 2004; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997; McClelland & Fine, 2008b; Morawski, 1997; Tolman, 2002).

For example, McClelland (2011) demonstrated how individuals who experienced greater marginalization in the sexual domain were also more likely to describe their sexual experiences from the perspective of their partner rather than themselves. This study linked several layers of data: (a) participants' descriptions of the criteria they used to decide whether they were sexually satisfied; (b) participants' analysis of their criteria and how these criteria had changed over time; and (c) an analysis strategy that assessed which groups consistently imagined themselves as the primary beneficiaries of sexual encounters and which did not. Linking participants' descriptions of their subjective experiences (in this case, of sexual satisfaction) with analysis of the social and historical contexts in which individuals were asked to appraise the quality of their lives (in this case, their sexual lives) is a hallmark of phenomenological research.

Last, it is important to note that the boundaries defining the subfield of phenomenological psychology are unclear at best. Debate over how broadly or narrowly to conceive the subfield has been extensive (e.g., Giorgi, 2006; Klein & Westcott, 1994). The present overview of phenomenological psychology construes the subfield in its broadest possible sense to provide readers with a useful array of methodological approaches to the psychological study of sexuality-related phenomena. In doing so, we follow Langdridge's (2007) four key characteristics of phenomenological psychology: focus on human experience, concern with how meaning arises for individuals, focus on description and relationships, and recognition of the researcher's role in the coconstruction of the topic under investigation.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHODS IN THE STUDY OF SEXUALITY

Before presenting specific phenomenological methods that are commonly used in the psychological study of sexuality, it is important to note which

aspects of research design are influenced by phenomenological concerns. In short, we suggest that all aspects of the design process should be attentive to principles of phenomenological psychology for the study to successfully achieve its goals of describing and interpreting complex meanings of sexuality-related phenomena. This includes the initial formulation of research questions and hypotheses, the selection of participants, the mode of data collection, the method of data analysis, and the presentation and discussion of the findings. Although the remainder of this chapter focuses primarily on methods of data collection and analysis, these design elements are nested within a larger research process. The research process typically begins with the generation of a research question or set of research questions. Example research questions concerned with the study of the subjective meanings of the lived experience of sexuality were presented earlier. Sampling, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings stem directly from and inform the study's research questions (Ouellette, 2003). The blanket term *methods* is often used to refer to sampling, data collection, and analysis strategies. However, there are important distinctions and interrelationships between these study components, several of which we highlight here.

Approaches to Data Collection in Phenomenological Research

One of the most frequently used methods of data collection in phenomenological studies of sexuality-related phenomena is the qualitative interview. There are many different types of interviewing methods, ranging from the structured interview method, which asks a consistent set of questions in a systematic order and with the same exact wording; to the semistructured interview, which relaxes these constraints of wording and sequence; to the clinical interview, which more often takes its cues from the participant concerning the appropriate order and emphases within the interview setting (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Frost et al., 2008; Kvale, 1994; Tolman, 2002). In the clinical interview, the aim is (sometimes) to arrive at a clinical diagnosis or some other form of assessment. Also common in phenomenological studies in psychology is the life history

interview, a specific subtype of qualitative interview focused on revealing the developmental trajectory of a person's life, often articulated through the narration of significant past events. Life history interviews can be both undirected (e.g., the participant tells the story of his or her life in whatever sequence and structure he or she sees fit in discourse with the interviewer; e.g., Mishler, 1986) or semistructured (e.g., a participant is directed by the interview protocol to talk about specific periods of his or her life—childhood, adolescence—or define the chapters of his or her life story; McAdams, 1995).

Although these methods of interviewing are often used to categorize distinct approaches to conducting interviews, it is important to recognize that they represent different approaches to collecting data and can sometimes be used within a single interview. For example, a psychologist who is interested in gaining insight into motivations for engaging in sexual risk behaviors might begin an interview with a series of structured questions to determine exactly which behaviors are relevant to a participant, followed by a less structured set of questions in which she asks a participant to tell her about the last time the participant engaged in a particular sexual behavior, thereby allowing motivational determinants to emerge naturally from the participant's descriptions. Alternatively, a psychologist interested in developmental questions might be interested in understanding the meanings and experiences of being a gay man across a participant's life course. He might begin his interview by asking a participant, "What memories do you have about your childhood and first sexual thoughts?" Once a participant expands on his experience in this regard, the interviewer might ask specific follow-up questions that are relevant only in relation to what the participant had already talked about and develop the interview in relationship to these early experiences and how they relate to later experiences of sexual identity.

Throughout the process of creating and conducting an interview, researchers must take steps to be conscious of how aspects of their own social location contribute to the decisions they make in study design, interview question selection, and reactions to participants' responses. This process, often

referred to as *reflexivity* (e.g., Morawski, 1994, 2005), is necessary for the interviewer or researcher to take into consideration how aspects of one's positionality (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education) profoundly shape the interaction between researcher and participant (Harding, 1993; see McCorkel & Myers, 2003, for an example). In her study of sexual desire among adolescent girls, Tolman (1994) likened the process of reflexivity to that of countertransference in the clinical or therapeutic setting. The interviewer's approach and reactions to the interviewee shape how the interviewee responds to the interviewer and, thus, what is ultimately said in the interview. Reflexivity is necessary to understand the contextual influence of the research setting on data collection and analysis (described next).

Not all data need to be collected using in-person interviews to be useful in a phenomenological investigation. Many elements of interview-based data collection strategies underlie the collection of other forms of data, including written data. For example, some researchers interested in collecting life story data have used structured writing prompts (e.g., guided autobiography; McAdams, 1995) to elicit participants' written narrative accounts of important events in their lives. Additionally, phenomenological researchers have increasingly used diary-based data collection strategies whereby participants are asked to keep diaries or journals with guided prompts that elicit written accounts surrounding a specific experience as it unfolds temporally over time. For example, in a study of the experience of pregnancy and how it shapes women's sense of self as mothers, Smith (1999) asked participants to keep weekly diaries in which they wrote down their thoughts and feelings related to being pregnant and becoming a mother. Such diary methods, sometimes referred to as *experience sampling methods* (Mehl & Conner, 2011), can also involve daily reporting of behaviors, emotions, and motivations in response to quantitative scales. Data collected via these methods can provide important insight into the subjective reality of phenomena as they vary within people over the course of a day or week, for example, thus allowing for a dynamic understanding of intrapersonal variability in the phenomena under investigation.

Defining Units of Analysis

Closely tied to data collection methods are decisions regarding the unit of analysis in an investigation. The unit of analysis is typically established by the researcher in the planning stage; thinking ahead to the analysis process, researchers should anticipate whether the data collected will be useful in answering their research questions. For example, if an investigator is examining why people engage in a behavior, data on how often someone engages in a behavior will not be sufficient; the investigator will need to consider a unit of analysis that provides information on meanings and motivations for the behavior of interest, not simply its frequency. When considering interview data, a unit of analysis can be defined in numerous ways. Some research questions will be best served by considering larger units (e.g., participants' life stories), and therefore the entire interview may be considered the unit of analysis. Other research questions may not require the entire interview but rather a subset of questions, themes, or images that emerge from the data. In short, researchers may identify specific aspects of the collected data as relevant units of analysis for a given research question.

As an illustrative example, the following text is drawn from a series of written relationship stories collected from individuals in long-term same-sex and heterosexual relationships (Frost, 2011c, 2012). The text was provided by a 55-year-old lesbian woman in a 10-year relationship in response to a prompt that asked her to "tell a story about an important decision you made in your relationship." Her response begins by describing when she and her partner decided to buy a house together:

In 2000, [my partner and I] bought a house together. This was a major decision, especially because it meant that [I] would have to sell the house that [I] had owned for 15 years, a house to which [I] was very attached emotionally. But that house had several drawbacks, one of which was that it wasn't ["our"] house. The new house was more expensive than [we] felt they could afford, but [we] both loved it, so [we] took a chance and

bought it. *[We] trusted that [we] would either make it work, and [we] agreed that, if at some future time [we] could no longer manage the mortgage payments, [we] would sell it and find a smaller house. This was an important decision because both [of us] have had to rely on each other to keep up with the mortgage payments as well as the housework.* Also, in another time and place, lesbian neighbors might not be accepted, but in this particular neighborhood, nobody seems to care who lives next door as long as they keep their lawn mowed. (Participant names have been removed; emphasis added during coding procedure.)

In an investigation of how participants' experiences of relationship stories shaped their relational well-being, Frost (2012) identified how individuals described moments of intimacy within significant relationship events. Frost's unit of analysis in this study focused on sentences within the relationship stories (e.g., the two italicized sentences in the preceding text illustrating themes of trust, commitment, and communicative intimacy). As a comparison, in another study using the same data, Frost (2011c) investigated how individuals in same-sex relationships negotiated experiences of stigma. In this study, he used the story as a whole as his unit of analysis, noting how the story evolved over the course of the narrative. This analysis demonstrated how participants narrated social stigma as "not as bad as it used to be" (as in the preceding example) or more simply as a heavy weight on their relationship (see Frost, 2011c). These depictions of the meanings of stigma are the result of an analysis of the whole story rather than of isolating specific parts. Because the same text can be analyzed in multiple ways for different purposes, it is essential that researchers clearly identify their units of analysis and ensure that their units of analysis are appropriate for the aims of their studies.

Phenomenological Approaches to Data Analysis

Once units of analysis have been defined and data have been collected, researchers proceed with the

process of data analysis. Multiple approaches to the analysis of qualitative data are relevant within phenomenological projects (for a review, see Madill & Gough, 2008). We highlight two analytic approaches from phenomenological investigations into the psychological experience of sexuality to provide readers with an introduction to some analytical approaches commonly used in the field. These approaches are thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). We refer to thematic and narrative analysis as *approaches* because they provide means to guide and organize data analysis. These approaches provide the basis for more specific operational analysis strategies and procedures, such as interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2004) and the Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Tolman, 1994), which are discussed later.

Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used approaches to the analysis of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) in their now classic overview of thematic approaches to analysis in psychology, "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (p. 79). A theme, therefore, "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

Thematic approaches within phenomenological investigations focus on identifying themes that capture, represent, and explicate the meanings and complexities of a given experience. Accordingly, researchers using thematic analytical approaches follow a step-by-step iterative process of thematic code development. First, each unit of analysis is subjected to initial readings by the researcher or group of researchers, who take initial notes on their overarching impressions of central themes. Next, transcripts are reread, and this time researchers attempt to code each transcript for these themes. Third, researchers adjust the initial definitions of the themes as the data warrant, thereby creating a codebook for final application. This codebook outlines the themes coded in a given study as well as the

conceptual and operational definitions of each theme (Weston et al., 2001). Transcripts are then read again, and the finalized codes are applied to the data. In instances in which the aims of the study require an indication for the reliability of the thematic coding scheme, multiple individuals code data for the presence or absence of themes. A significant amount of controversy exists in the field regarding the applicability of reliability and validity in the analysis of qualitative data; however, many have argued for the retention of these concepts and apply them in ways consistent with the aims of qualitative inquiry as opposed to statistical research (cf. Fine, 2006; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen, & Spiers, 2002). Once codes have been applied, researchers are able to look across the dataset to observe the central themes in relation to the research questions.

For example, Frost et al. (2008) interviewed 32 HIV-positive and HIV-negative gay men about their approaches to finding sexual and relationship partners of the same HIV status. They followed a three-step iterative process of thematic code development: first, reading each interview transcript independently and developing an initial list of salient themes; second, attempting to code each transcript for these themes; and third, adjusting the themes as the data warranted. In defining intimacy for initial coding, they started with a theory-derived definition of intimacy motivation: the desire or need to feel sexually, physically, emotionally, or communicatively close to another (following Prager, 1995). As themes elicited from the narratives required this definition to change, their iterative approach to thematic analysis allowed for necessary flexibility. The final operational definition of intimacy used in this study included the theory-derived definition but was supplemented with notions of how participants described a sense of having a shared future with a partner as well as experiences and expectations of care provision for themselves, their partner, or both. Illuminating the ways in which themes of intimacy emerged in men's interviews in relation to themes of HIV risk reduction allowed Frost et al. to highlight how a desire for intimacy with a partner can both facilitate and undermine sexual health decision making (e.g., decisions to use or not use condoms in newly forming relationships).

Narrative analysis is another common approach to the analysis of qualitative data in psychology. Although not limited to phenomenological studies, narrative analysis is focused on uncovering the ways in which individuals' stories reveal how people make meaning of their everyday lived experience and aspects of their social contexts (e.g., Frost & Ouellette, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Narrative analytical approaches are grounded in the fundamental notion that people use narratives (or stories) to make sense of the world and construct a sense of self (e.g., Bruner, 1991). Unlike thematic analysis, narrative analysis is focused on understanding the storied nature of lived experience and therefore requires that data have a narrative structure. Narrative structure involves a temporally organized sequence of events—though not necessarily a linear one—that involves actors and actions. The elements of a participant's story are then subjected to analytical readings designed to understand the plot and purpose of the story and its subjective importance to the teller.

What actually happened in the event is not typically prioritized in a narrative analysis. Rather, the way a participant tells the story is considered to be revealing of the subjective meanings of the elements of the event (behaviors, emotions, relationships with people involved, cultural factors). Narrative analysis thus borrows from literary analysis, in that it often seeks to document the coherence of a narrative (how the parts fit together), the affective tone of a participant's telling (positive, negative), perspective (distancing, inclusive), linguistic referent (*I/my, we/ours*), and type of narrative arc (redemptive plots, contamination plots; McAdams, 2006). For example, in the narrative study of members of same-sex couples' relationship stories described earlier, Frost (2011c) did not seek to understand whether stigma affected intimacy in same-sex couples; he instead sought to understand how participants made both positive and negative meanings of experiences of intimacy in events involving stigmatization.

In short, in narrative analytical approaches, the participant's story is the unit of analysis, and the way in which it is built from its component parts is analyzed to reveal the subjective meanings of the experience under investigation. However, as is often

the case with longer interviews (e.g., clinical interviews, life story interviews), one interview transcript may contain multiple narratives. For instance, a life history interview may contain specific event narratives (e.g., parents' divorce, birth of first child), but there is often an overarching narrative structure to the life story as a whole (e.g., early struggles led to later success; McAdams, 2006). Recognizing which narratives enter into the process of analysis is part of the task of selecting relevant units of analysis. Including all of the narratives that emerge in a given interview can be useful in identifying the meta-narratives, or overarching story structures, that shape what (and how) smaller narratives are told in a given interview.

Approaches to thematic analysis and narrative analysis typically involve inductive foundations. Inductive foundations—of which grounded theory is one (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967)—involve only minimal theoretical knowledge and assumptions before analysis. Unlike with many psychological research methods, approaching thematic or narrative analysis from an inductive foundation does not seek to test theory or prove a causal relationship between constructs. Instead, it seeks to build or expand theoretical understandings of lived experience within an underexplored area of investigation (e.g., McClelland, 2011). Starting from the assumption that theories are often inadequate to describe the populations or processes to which they are applied, inductive approaches such as thematic and narrative analysis seek to expand existing theories to more adequately attend to the diversity of experiences. This is especially important in studies of sexuality, in which contemporary ideologies, norms, and laws often guide the development of sexuality theories both implicitly and explicitly (see Chapters 1 and 3, this volume). An essential task of research is to encourage the formation of new ideas and to note when old ideologies fall away, for example, the increasing treatment of adolescent sexuality as a normative aspect of development rather than as merely a sign of pathology or deviance (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Phenomenological methods, overall, share an interest in developing theoretical and empirical research that expands ideological assumptions about human diversity.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: EXAMPLES OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF SEXUALITY

Thus far, we have discussed approaches to data collection and analysis separately. This distinction—although helpful in highlighting the important decisions needed for each step—creates an artificial impression that data collection and analysis are not dependent on one another. Data collection and analysis are, in fact, related processes and need to be planned for as such in the design of any phenomenological investigation into the psychological experience of sexuality. Three studies are presented in this section as a way to illustrate several forms of phenomenological research methods as they are put into practice to examine topics central to the psychological experience of sexuality.

Example 1: The Narrative Study of Lives

Summary of aims. Hammack, Thompson, and Pilecki (2009) is an excellent example of the use of the narrative study of lives to understand the phenomenon of how young people come to develop a sexual identity amid shifting sexual norms and social contexts that influence when, how, and with whom one can have sex, can desire, and build community (see Chapters 13 and 20, this volume). Noting recent significant shifts in the cultural contexts in which sexual minority youths develop, Hammack et al. (2009) aimed to understand how same-sex-attracted emerging adults develop sexual identities. More specifically, these researchers sought to understand the relationships between sociopolitical contexts, desire, and sexual identity. They aimed to shift the discourse on sexual minority youth development, which has largely focused on discourses of struggles with coming out and assumptions about committing to a singular identity (i.e., gay, lesbian, or bisexual) toward a direction more closely reflecting the complicated experiences of young people's sexual development.

Hammack et al. (2009) used a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of sexual identity development grounded in the narrative study of lives (Cohler, 2007; Gregg, 2007; McAdams, 2006), which allowed them to examine how the common

but limited discourses of sexual identity affected individual identity construction as well as strategies that incorporated, synthesized, and restructured these discourses. The study was primarily focused on understanding how sexual identities were experienced and made meaningful in lived experiences of same-sex-attracted emerging adults through the process of narrative engagement. The concept of narrative engagement was operationalized as the ways in which same-sex-attracted emerging adults told their life stories, which evidenced how they constructed their own identities in relation to prevailing societal discourses. This conceptualization of identity as a dynamic and evolving life story (Hammack, 2008; McAdams & Pals, 2006) sits in contrast to more common notions of sexual identity as singular and categorical (e.g., gay, lesbian, or bisexual; see Chapter 18, this volume).

Data collection strategies. Focusing primarily on description and interpretation of individual participant experiences rather than on aggregation of data across cases, Hammack et al. (2009) collected life story data from four youths, two self-identified men and two self-identified women, in semistructured interviews that lasted from 2 to 4 hours. The interview was divided into three parts: (a) an exercise allowing participants to draw a “lifeline” representing their life trajectory thus far, explaining the ups and downs as they corresponded to life events; (b) McAdams’s (1995) Life Story Interview, composed of questions regarding life experiences (e.g., name chapters in your life; identify and describe a high point in your life, a low point); and (c) questions relating to sexual identity, desire, behavior and experience. The first two portions of the interview protocol contained no explicit reference to sexuality and allowed researchers to evaluate the emergence and integration of same-sex desire in personal identity configuration. As a result, Hammack et al. (2009) could examine how participants constructed sexuality in their narratives before interviewer prompting, and the protocol allowed participants to narrate sexual identities that would potentially not fit within categorical measures.

Data analysis strategies. In their analysis, Hammack et al. (2009) focused on how participants’ discussions of desire and behavior were narrated

as integrated with one another or in conflict as evidence of their roles in shaping identity. In this regard, the ways in which desire and behavior were (or were not) interrelated within participants’ interviews was treated as evidence of the process of narrative engagement in their construction of identity as a life story. Thus, each participant’s overarching life story narrative constituted the unit of analysis, rather than specific event descriptions or individual sentences. The research team paid close attention to moments in the narrative when participants referenced the relevance of or their interactions with social discourses (e.g., historical, familial, religious, and cultural attitudes and expectations surrounding sexuality). This revealed the role of social factors in emerging adults’ lived experiences of sexual desire and behavior.

Summary of study conclusions. Hammack et al.’s (2009) phenomenological narrative approach produced findings that (a) descriptively revealed the individualized aspects of behavior, desire, and identity and (b) analytically linked these individual experiences to the larger contexts of available opportunities, social support systems, and accessible narratives. For example, although one participant, Francine, assumed her same-sex desire required embracing a categorical lesbian identity, she still felt attracted to men and referred to herself behaviorally as bisexual. The other-sex desire she continued to experience conflicted with the social, historical, and cultural expectations for the lesbian identity Francine committed to at an early age. In their analysis, Hammack et al. found her to be grappling with bisexual feelings in a biphobic social context (i.e., she felt prejudice against bisexuals), which prevented her from integrating her desire and behavior within an integrative life story narrative. In other words, simply claiming a bisexual identity was not an authentic option for Francine, given that she perceived negative societal and historical connotations associated with identifying as bisexual. Thus, she remained committed to a lesbian identity even though this identity category may not have sufficiently reflected and integrated her sexual behavior and desire.

In highlighting “the idiographic complexity of individual lives” (Hammack et al., 2009, p. 879), this

study revealed the importance of context at both a sociocultural and an individual level. Hammack et al. (2009) concluded that their phenomenological approach to studying narrative engagement bridged the individual with the social, conceiving of neither as producing the other and instead revealing the ways in which social discourses and lived experience are inextricably interrelated. The researchers found that the categories of sexual identity with which participants narratively engaged in their construction of life stories lacked stability; because individuals sometimes drew on multiple categories (e.g., lesbian, bisexual) and social discourses, they continually renegotiated boundaries and definitions of what sexual identity meant to them. Sexual identity was not the unchanging, singular experience that previous psychological research and commonly held societal assumptions portrayed. Instead, Hammack et al.'s findings demonstrated that sexual identity is negotiated and restructured to construct a life story and identity, which can at times be coherent but is inclusive of seemingly contradictory desires and behaviors.

Utility of phenomenological methods. This analysis of emerging adult narratives, grounded in the narrative-study-of-lives approach, highlighted both personal context and cultural factors that shape identity within the process of narrative engagement. Although the study did not offer a singular generalizable process guiding sexual minority identity development, it highlights the importance of the interaction between lived experience and particular social contexts (e.g., biphobia and the limitations of singular identity categories) in the process of meaning-making and individual development and endorses further study of sexual identity using the narrative study of lives.

Example 2: Phenomenological Uses of Clinical Interviewing and Thematic Analysis

Summary of aims. Tolman's (1994) study of female sexuality is an excellent example of a study that pairs a common approach to qualitative data collection (i.e., clinical interviewing) with an analysis of narrative data with a phenomenological aim: to understand the complexities of adolescent girls'

lived experience of sexual desire. Tolman's research integrated findings from previous research on adolescent girls' relational selves (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1989) with research concerning girls' sexual stories and how these stories include, or more often lack, recognition of sexual desire (Fine, 1988; Thompson, 1984, 1990). Specifically, Tolman aimed to describe what adolescent girls' experiences of sexual desire looked like within their own lived experience as well as to understand and explain how adolescent girls described their experiences of (and responses to) their own sexual desire. Tolman was, furthermore, interested in understanding how sociocultural factors defined the boundaries of female sexual freedom.

Data collection strategies. To accomplish these aims, Tolman (1994) used a clinical interview protocol that favored the elicitation of narratives as opposed to direct answers to specific prompts. The resulting narratives provided data that privileged the girls' own voices in their retelling of their experiences and responses to their own sexual desire. Tolman collected 30 semistructured, one-on-one clinical interviews from adolescent girls of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, religions, sexual experiences, and school environments (e.g., urban and suburban). Given Tolman's interests in the sociocultural factors that shaped girls' sexuality, sampling for diversity along these social dimensions ensured that she would be able to examine variability across the girls' lived experiences as well as analyze the data for whether that variability was related to differences in social context.

Data analysis strategies. Tolman (1994) used a specific narrative analytic approach—the Listening Guide—to conduct a discursive narrative analysis (Brown, Debold, Gilligan, & Tappan, 1991; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller, & Argyris, 1989). The Listening Guide highlights the multiple voices that are often present in the telling of a narrative and was developed as a way to discern the polyphonic nature of girls' narratives. The Listening Guide approach requires multiple readings of each interview, with each reading focusing on a particular voice. Tolman identified four voices, defined as “a way of speaking that has an identifiable

set of coherent features” (Tolman & Szalacha, 1999, p. 14): the self, erotic voice, voice of the body, and voice of response to one’s desire. The Listening Guide’s discursive features allow the researcher to focus on the roles and interplay of these multiple voices in constructing narratives of lived experience as well as on how such voices are often in implicit conversation with cultural discourses (e.g., media portrayals, historical constructions, and normative expectations of sexual desire).

Through recognition of both the listener and the participant as subjective coconstructors of the text, the analysis included notation of the interviewer’s thoughts and reactions to the participant’s narratives. Tolman paid specific attention in the processes of interviewing and analysis to how she, as the researcher, shaped the context in which the data arose, thus illuminating how the researcher exists as an audience for whom stories are told. For example, asking questions about participants’ bodily experience of sexuality gave participants opportunities to talk about embodied experiences of their desire that were new to some, highlighting both the silencing of physical pleasure in girls’ lives outside of the interview context, but also giving them an opportunity to voice such experiences within the interview (see Chapter 25, this volume).

Summary of study conclusions. Tolman’s (1994) analysis revealed that although two thirds of participants spoke about their own bodily experiences of sexual feelings, three participants perceived their bodies as silent, and the remainder related confusion about their experience of sexual desire. All who spoke of feeling sexual desire described a conflict between these feelings and cultural expectations or socially constructed problems as connected to female sexual desire (see Volume 2, Chapter 6, this handbook).

Participants’ narratives revealed intrapersonal discrepancies in the form of intense conflict between their sexual feelings and their awareness of the social and relational consequences of desire. For example, one participant, Megan, who identified as bisexual, voiced confusion as she described feeling responsible for subduing her male partner’s sexual desire despite her own strong desires; she worried that her failure to do so would categorize her as a slut. Megan also related confusion as she described

silencing her bodily feelings for girls and her perception that society deemed her same-sex attraction unnatural. These intrapersonal conflicts in Megan’s narratives of her sexual desire evidenced how social context (e.g., societal expectations of sexual restraint and heteronormativity) played important and distinct roles in her subjective experiences of sexual desire for both other-sex and same-sex partners.

This study design also granted Tolman (1994) access to girls’ solutions to what she termed *sexual desire dilemmas*, or feelings of conflict between wanting to experience sexual desire and pleasure while also responding to social demands to silence their desire and pleasure. For example, a heterosexual participant from an urban school, Rochelle, described feelings of sexual desire but fearfully equated acting on them with increasing her vulnerability to the stigma of a bad reputation, the possibility of sexually transmitted infections, and the reality of male violence. Although sometimes able to experience her desire privately when alone and safe from her feared social consequences, Rochelle’s narratives illustrated how some girls might be able to solve the problem of struggling with their sexual feelings in an unsafe social context. The ways in which dilemmas of desire were negotiated privately by girls was deemed problematic in that it potentially diminished girls’ own experiences and did not challenge the limiting social contexts that continued to silence and problematize female sexuality.

Utility of phenomenological methods. This study’s clinical interviewing and narrative analysis allowed for the discovery of layered complexity in girls’ experiences of their own sexual desire and revealed the wide range of meanings participants attached to their bodily feelings. The narrative collection and analysis of data, centered on the Listening Guide approach, enabled Tolman (1994) to look beyond the presence or absence of girls’ sexual desire and revealed the ways in which adolescent female sexuality was understood and expressed in relationship to the particular limitations and freedoms afforded by social environments (see Chapter 15, this volume).

Rooted in feminist psychological foundations, evidence of the social forces that oppress and silence

female sexuality offered potential insights into intervention opportunities. Specifically, Tolman's (1994) findings suggested that on an individual level, educating girls about sexual desire, as well as talking to them about their own sexual feelings, could ease their psychological dilemmas and reduce their experiences of internalized oppression. However, additional intervention is needed on a social level to challenge the societal oppression and silencing of women's sexual selves by creating opportunity structures for women to be able to express and act on their sexual desire.

Example 3: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Summary of aims. Touroni and Coyle's (2002) study of lesbian couples and parenthood is an excellent example of a phenomenological approach to thematic data analysis as a means to better understand qualities in reproduction and family formation in lesbian families. Although many previous studies had focused on children's development in lesbian-parented families, Touroni and Coyle (2002) sought to investigate internal and external factors affecting decisions to have children, including paternal involvement or anonymity and parenting roles. Given that the decision to have a child is just the first in a string of decisions and negotiations lesbian parents must make, this investigation aimed to understand the complexities of the lived experiences of lesbian parenting and provide further information for professionals who assist lesbian couples desiring to become parents (see Chapter 23, this volume; Volume 2, Chapter 7, this handbook).

Data collection strategies. Touroni and Coyle (2002) recruited lesbian couples who were expecting or who already had at least one child in the context of their current relationship. These individuals were recruited for the study because they were presumed to have engaged in the negotiating or decision-making process of planning to have a child and were well positioned to provide retrospective accounts of their experiences of becoming parents. Nine couples were interviewed together in their homes for between 1 hour and 1.75 hours. Notably, the interviewer posed questions to the couple, rather than to each individual, to "obtain a negotiated

account from each couple in which partners could contribute their individual recollections to the construction of an agreed version of events" (Touroni & Coyle, 2002, p. 196). Interviewers began by asking background questions and collecting basic demographic data and then asking questions concerning the couple's motivations to become parents, decision making throughout this process, and negotiations of biological and nonbiological parent roles. This interviewing method was designed to recognize and model the collaborative nature of the decision-making process to become parents, given that the participants were essentially required to collaborate in their joint responses to the interviewers' questions. Their interactions with each other in the interview context provided the researchers with further insight into the interpersonal dynamic of each couple.

Data analysis strategies. Touroni and Coyle's (2002) study used a specific type of thematic analysis—interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004)—to focus on the subjective experience of decision making in the context of planned lesbian parenting. Unlike forms of thematic analysis that simply focus on the presence or absence of themes in a given set of interviews, IPA emphasizes both the description and the interpretation (i.e., analysis) of participants' experiences through a focus on the construction of the meaning of a given phenomenon within the research context. Emerging themes are thus illustrative of components of the overarching meaning of an experience. IPA requires an iterative process of thematic code development requiring multiple readings of the data. Specifically, Touroni and Coyle's use of IPA required readings of the interview transcripts and the production of summary notes on key phrases and concepts emerging within each individual transcript regarding motivations, concerns, and negotiations during the pregnancy planning process. The researchers solidified initial themes in the data by reviewing these notes. Analysis then shifted toward reading across all of the transcripts, comparing interview notes, and identifying common or superordinate themes across all interviews. This process resulted in a hierarchical structure to the findings, which represented the relationships between the themes as lived

by the participants. For example, concerns about paternal involvement and conception fell under the overarching theme of decision making about using known or anonymous sperm donors and were distributed across two subordinate themes of opting for a known donor and opting for an anonymous donor. It is important to note that the analytical focus was on how couples negotiated these aspects of becoming same-sex parents, as identified by the emergent themes.

Touroni and Coyle (2002) were especially interested in the interactions between researcher and participant rather than providing an objective account of participant experience, as determined by the researchers. Interviewing itself was conceptualized as a reflexive and dynamic process; participants' accounts were considered to be shaped by both interviewer and participant. For example, the researchers discussed and assessed the possible contributions of their roles as a lesbian counseling psychologist and a gay male social psychologist to the interview and analysis process. Their shared identities as sexual minorities may have provided them with unique insight into some of their participants' experiences. However, not being parents may have allowed them to hear more from participants regarding experiences of parental decision making that may not have been shared with other same-sex parents because participants may have assumed some aspects of the experience to be taken for granted by similar others.

Summary of study conclusions. The use of IPA identified four overarching themes emerging from conversations about planning parenthood with lesbian couples, including (a) internal factors motivating couples to have children, (b) external factors contextualizing their experience, (c) decisions regarding paternal anonymity or involvement, and (d) parental roles for the biological and nonbiological parent. Internal factors primarily involved a desire to have children and a feeling that it was the right time in one's life and relationship. When considering external factors, participants identified the relatively recent positive shift in public discourses conceptualizing the possibility of parenthood for lesbian couples. Still, some participants noted a

distinct lack of role models for lesbian parenting, and discrimination concerns remained present in their minds. Decisions to opt for a known sperm donor were motivated by a desire to have control of the conception process and for a child to know his or her biological father. However, negotiating paternal involvement could then become a complex issue. Some couples opted for an anonymous donor on the basis of a desire to avoid conflict with the biological father and the potential strain he might create. Finally, parent-child relationships were frequently discussed as they related to the bonds of biological parent and nonbiological parent. Whereas the biological parent, or mother, seemed to have a stable identity, more work went into developing, defining, and negotiating the role of the nonbiological parent.

Utility of phenomenological methods. IPA is a particularly useful form of thematic data analysis in that it allows for both an understanding of what elements of an experience matter to participants (through a description of emergent themes) and the meaning of the experience (through interpretive analysis; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In their application of IPA, Touroni and Coyle (2002) revealed unique factors relevant to lesbian parenting that influence women's decisions to parent and the decisions that often follow from wanting to become a parent. By collecting accounts from couples rather than interviewing individuals, Touroni and Coyle examined the decision-making processes surrounding each of the concerns of lesbian parents identified in their analysis. As a result, their study provides an in-depth account of the factors and struggles (e.g., lack of role models, discrimination) that lesbian parents confront. These findings offer important insight for practitioners working with lesbian couples who seek to provide support and guidance throughout the process of becoming parents.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The three exemplar studies discussed in the preceding section demonstrate how phenomenological data collection and analysis methods provide important perspectives on the study of sexuality. These

perspectives include increased attention to intrapersonal and interpersonal variability, the roles of time and sociohistorical changes in people's lives, and analysis of the ways in which the meanings of lived experience are inexorably linked to social context. However, just as with any method, phenomenological methods come with limitations. Two of these limitations are the role of generalizability to larger populations and a focus on participants' access to language and voice as the route to self-knowledge. We discuss both in detail next.

Question of Generalizability

Phenomenological methods focus on participants' descriptions and analysis of their lived experience. Data are typically collected from a small number of participants because of the in-depth and time-consuming nature of the data collection. Although some investigators use phenomenological methods to make interpretive claims by examining patterns across participants to speak to a larger shared experience in a population, phenomenological methods do not test causal or explanatory hypotheses. In short, traditional notions of statistical generalizability cannot be applied when gauging the value of findings from phenomenological research. What phenomenological methods do provide, however, are insights into the ways in which social, political, and historical contexts interact with individual development (e.g., how same-sex couples experience and subvert discriminatory social policy).

For example, the narrative study of lives does not seek to estimate the average experience of or parameters within a population. The power of the narrative study of lives lies in its ability to provide detailed analysis of the interactive processes shaping human development, as evidenced in the discussion of narrative engagement with sexual identity (Hammack et al., 2009). Although this method does not give one a complete account of the frequency of any given experience, phenomenological methods paint a detailed and nuanced picture of a small set of subjective accounts to offer a sense of the processes that occur at the level of everyday lived experience (e.g., Frost & Ouellette, 2011). This kind of detail is especially useful when researchers are interested in understanding the meanings and experiences of sexuality-related

phenomena that are not well understood or are insufficiently theorized (see Chapter 1, this volume).

Role of Language and Voice

The strengths of phenomenological methods of data collection, such as clinical interviewing, are that they often ask participants to describe their sexuality-related experiences. Although relying on participants' voice and self-generated description enables greater insight into how participants are making meaning of their experiences, these methods are limited to aspects of sexuality that participants are able and willing to communicate. It is possible that in an interview, participants are limited by broader constraints that maintain the invisibility of important aspects of their experiences, including limited self-understanding, image management, social stigmas, and (perhaps most important) experiences that have been lived but not yet languaged (i.e., turned from inchoate experiences to communicable utterances; see McClelland & Fine, 2008a). The language available to individuals for making sense of their sexualities may differ on the basis of their social location and access to privilege in many forms, including but not limited to educational attainment, sex education, and being native speakers of the language of investigation.

McClelland and Fine (2008b) described the methodological dilemma inherent in research with young women on topics concerning sexual desire: Researchers want to rely on participants' subjective descriptions and interpretations but are often faced with participants who have been systematically marginalized and may lack adequate language to describe their experiences. Building from Fine's (1988) seminal writing on the missing discourse of desire, McClelland and Fine (2008b) offered a series of methodological release points that aim to help researchers navigate this dilemma, including research practices such as asking participants to reflect on previously published findings about adolescent sexual behavior as a way to collect young people's insights into these data or using focus groups to inquire about topics that might be read as shaming by research participants struggling to adhere to sexual norms. Last, McClelland and Fine (2008a) theorized an emerging version of sexual

desire in the form of want. McClelland and Fine (2008a) argued that want may offer a quieter form of expression and may provide an additional lens by which to inquire about and assess young women's experiences of developing sexualities.

McClelland and Fine (2008a, 2008b, in press), along with other psychological researchers, have worked to shine a light on how and what participants talk about when they describe their sexuality while still drawing attention to the difficult balance between telling it like it is (Midgley, 2006) and critically analyzing the ideologies and discourses that participants speak with and through. The image of being wrapped in cellophane provides a metaphor for the limitations that both researcher and participant face when trying to communicate about topics related to sexuality, topics that are often weighted with sexual stigmas (McClelland & Fine, 2008b). When reflecting on the role of voice in phenomenological research, it is essential "to recognize that when someone speaks . . . we must assume that there are other relevant words both unspoken and not-yet-spoken" (McClelland & Fine, 2008b, p. 240). It is in these spaces between participant and researcher, and between the spoken and the yet-to-be-spoken, that researchers must work to listen, document, and critically assess the lives of individuals, groups, and psychological phenomena.

Reflections on Phenomenological Methods

Given the wide range of research methods and analysis strategies available to the psychologically oriented researcher studying sexuality, what do phenomenological methods offer that other methods do not? Sex and sexuality are in some sense mundane in that they represent everyday phenomena. Both have also been defined as extraordinary, taboo, and areas of intense speculation, regulation, and curiosity. This tension between sexuality's mundaneness and its extraordinariness creates a unique space for study: Individuals must negotiate this space within themselves and often with partners and families as they develop and change throughout their lifetime (see Chapter 13, this volume). This quality highlights that there may be something unique about sexuality (and the research questions it produces) that demands research methods that are

capable of examining these dimensions, attending to temporal shifts, and understanding the role of social norms in individuals' lives.

There are many different ways to understand the phenomena of sex and sexuality. Understanding the physiological responses within individuals related to their sexuality (e.g., brain response during orgasm or hormone levels during arousal) offers one type of insight (see Chapter 5, this volume); assessing the frequency of sexual behaviors or the number of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender offers yet another type of insight into the phenomenon of sexuality (see Chapter 4, this volume). Yet the need remains to examine other aspects of sexuality, many of which researchers remain unaware or only vaguely aware. In this regard, phenomenological methods provide an important alternative or complement to other, more widely used research methods in the psychological study of sexuality.

Phenomenological methods uniquely allow psychologists to understand the wide range of variability in the psychological experience and meanings of sexuality in particular and how these experiences shape and are shaped by social and historical contexts. Thus, by uncovering new social scientific knowledge stemming from the documentation of subjective experiences, other nomothetically oriented projects in psychology can build better assessment techniques and more accurately define sexual well-being outcomes (e.g., Edwards & Coleman, 2004; McClelland, 2011, 2012; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Sanders et al., 2010) as well as better document the need for sexuality-related social and clinical policy change (for reviews, see Frost & de Vries, 2011, and Volume 2, Chapter 10, this handbook). This is the important role that phenomenological research plays within the broader psychological study of sexuality.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this chapter, we presented several of the foundational components of phenomenological inquiry into the psychological experience of sexuality and highlighted specific approaches to conducting this kind of research. Along the way, we have pointed

out the benefits of and limitations to phenomenological approaches with regard to their abilities to contribute to the growing body of research on psychology and human sexuality. This discussion is designed to aid researchers interested in gaining the tools necessary to begin their own psychological investigations into sexuality-related phenomena as well as to interest them in these new avenues of inquiry. In further service of this interest, we close with a discussion of potential new directions and advancements in phenomenological investigations into the psychological experience of sexuality.

Thus far, given their roots in pursuit of idiographic and individual experience, phenomenological methods have been well applied to the understanding of individuals' meanings and experiences of sexuality (e.g., identity, desire, behavior). However, sexuality is also, at times, a relational phenomenon, and thus methods limited to capturing the experience of one individual are inherently limited in their ability to explicate relational meanings and the coconstruction of the experience of sexuality. For example, Frost (2011b, 2011c, 2012; Frost & Ouellette, 2004, 2011) has used narrative research methods in efforts to understand the meanings of intimacy that individuals have within their romantic relationships. Given that romantic relationships involve more than one individual, this research is limited, and necessary next steps in this line of inquiry require an understanding how meanings of experience are coconstructed within couples, as shown by Touroni and Coyle (2002; see also Chapter 10, this volume). This will require advancing phenomenological research methods to incorporate dyadic data collection and analysis strategies. Phenomenological psychologists have voiced concerns over such methodological expansions (e.g., focus groups; see Smith, 2004), given the concomitant shift in focus away from the meaning of individual experiences. These concerns must be addressed in advancing a relational phenomenology of the psychological experience of sexuality.

Moreover, given that phenomenological data collection methods traditionally involve intensive face-to-face interviews, phenomenological investigations into the psychological experience of sexuality have been geographically bound to only those locations

accessible to the researchers. Location restrictions bias all forms of research into experiences and qualities of individuals that may be geographically unique. As Internet-based research methods in psychology continue to develop, they may offer tools to phenomenological researchers that can help address this limitation. For example, narrative researchers have used the Internet to recruit geographically diverse samples of individuals to provide written narrative accounts of events (e.g., Frost, 2011b; van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx, & Pasley, 2008). Given that psychological experiences of sexuality-related phenomena are grounded in cultural and structural contexts that are often geographically specific, expanding the boundaries of phenomenological methods in the psychological study of sexuality is a necessary next step if psychologists are interested in understanding how location, place, and psychology are related (Ittelson, Proshansky, Rivlin, & Winkel, 1974; Proshansky, 1987).

An additional limitation is the retrospective bias of cross-sectional interview methods in attempting to study development and change over time. Phenomenological approaches must expand to include longitudinal designs to improve their claims regarding the lived change in sexuality-related phenomena over time. Most notable in this regard is Diamond's (2008) research on sexual fluidity. With repeated interviewing of a cohort of young women over 10 years who initially identified as nonheterosexual, Diamond's study yielded knowledge about intrapersonal stability and change in sexual desire, identity, and behavior and how these processes influenced and were influenced by women's social and relational contexts (i.e., changing norms about family, trans identities, and legal restrictions on same-sex relationships). Additional research on change in other aspects of sexuality can benefit from longitudinal methods that have grown increasingly popular in nomothetic investigations, such as experience sampling and daily diary methods (e.g., Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Impett et al., 2010).

Future research on the meanings and experiences of sexuality-related phenomena must also explore the direct and indirect utility of forms of data other than qualitative, first-person accounts.

Research by Tolman and Szalacha (1999) has highlighted potential expanded insights into the psychological experience of sexuality that can be gained from bringing both qualitative and quantitative data to bear on a single research question in a mixed-methods approach. Such approaches are distinct from multimethod approaches that use separate methods (e.g., interview and survey) to produce separate data sets to answer separate research questions. Mixed-methods designs relevant to phenomenological approaches in psychology begin with units of analysis that provide idiographic insights. Researchers (and participants) can apply quantitative coding schemes to those original data that allow for additional insight into observable patterns and the ability to make nomothetic conclusions about subjective phenomenological experience (e.g., Frost, 2012; McClelland, 2011; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999).

CONCLUSIONS

As evidenced by the work highlighted in this chapter, phenomenological methods offer the psychological study of sexuality a means to understand the high degree of intrapersonal and interpersonal variability in lived experiences of sexuality. In other words, understanding the complex meanings of sexuality with which we began this chapter is a task well suited to psychologists who use phenomenological methods in their research. As the need for knowledge surrounding the nuances of the subjective experience of sexuality grows increasingly scientifically and socially salient, future work on the psychology of sexuality will greatly benefit from the implementation and integration of phenomenological methods.

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