

# THE EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD (EPM): THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND RESEARCH APPLICATIONS

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## Abstract.

The Panel aims to present an original interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological method (2012) in order to found the theory of an empirical phenomenology. The "Empirical Phenomenological Method" (EPM) (Mortari, 2022) grounded in this theory will be firstly described; then, its application in healthcare and educational research will be presented.

### *The theory of empirical phenomenology*

The method of the phenomenological philosophy has been developed by Husserl (2012) for the eidetic sciences, which is interested in the general essence, i.e. in the persistent characteristics of things, instead the empirical sciences are sciences of facts, interested in the concrete, singular, contextual and accidental qualities of phenomena. This rises the following questions: if the empirical science is interested in what phenomenology is not interested, is it legitimate to apply the phenomenological method to the empirical human sciences? Moreover, can the empirical sciences, although they are interested in the situational qualities, deal themselves with the research for essences in order to give a rigorous basis to the research? And if they can, what kind of essence would it be? Is it possible to hypothesize two different concepts of essence? To address these questions means to search for the form of application of the phenomenological method in the sciences of experience.

The first step to be taken, in order to outline the theory of an empirical phenomenology, is to identify similarities and differences between the eidetic phenomenology and the science of the experience. The former has as its object of investigation the lived experiences of the mind, however, they are not considered in their concreteness but they are explored in order to catch the pure essences, and to catch the pure essence is a grasping of intuition; the second has the same object, but, as a science of facts, it needs to stay bound to the concretely lived data, and as a method, it cannot rely on intuition but proceeds through a continuous analysis of the data.

Once established that the object is the same, i.e. the lived experiences of the mind, there are two further basic questions to be addressed: is it possible to found the empirical knowledge on the principle of searching for the essences? If it is possible, what operation can be implemented in order to delineate the essences in the field of the empirical research?

Since we do not encounter general pure essences in the concrete reality, but we only meet phenomena that present themselves as the particular actualizations of the essences, it is legitimate to distinguish between the eidetic essence, which is constituted by a set of essential predicates that necessarily belong to the thing (Husserl, 2012), and the essence of the concrete, which is constituted by a set of predicates that characterizes that unique and singular thing in the space and time in which it manifests itself. Differently from the eidetic phenomenology that searches for the eidetic essence, i.e. for the general predicates, of a lived experience, the science of experience searches for its contingent qualities, i.e. for the essence of the concrete, with the aim to build a knowledge that



embraces as many as possible forms of the concrete differentiations of the real. To collect many lived experiences, describe them and catch their essence of the concrete is the first step, but it is not sufficient in order to build science, because to remain lost in the extreme differentiation of the real is not yet science. Therefore, the methodological proposal presented in the Panel hypothesizes that a science of experience is built by firstly acquiring a knowledge of the singular concrete essences and then reaching a formulation of an extended essence of the concrete. The extended concrete essence is built by starting from the analysis of the singular concrete essences, and is the one that summarizes the qualities that are common to the different elements of experience collected during an investigation.

#### *The Empirical Phenomenological Method*

The theory of empirical phenomenology presented above allows to found the Empirical Phenomenological Method (EPM), which can be applied in order to understand the lived experiences collected through the empirical research in the field of social sciences.

First of all, it is important to point out that the distinction between eidetic sciences and empirical sciences does not imply a disconnection in the investigative process, because the research for the general essences is necessary in order to orient the research for the concretely experienced essences. Indeed, to identify the object of the research implies to have a clear definition of the eidetic essence of the phenomena that will be considered. After this preliminary eidetic investigation, it is possible to carry out the heuristic principles and analytical procedures of the EPM, which can be summarized as follows:

- a) to have access to concrete singular data: to choose the adequate instruments to collect the participant's lived experiences
- b) to collect a plurality of lived experiences: to engage a plurality of participants (purposeful sampling) in order to collect descriptions or narrations of the different actualizations of the phenomenon
- c) to define the individual concrete essence of each lived experience: to elaborate a descriptive label for each collected datum
- d) to build classes of similar data: to cluster similar descriptive labels
- e) to formulate the first level of the extended essences: to express with conceptual labels (category) the essence of the identified clusters
- f) to build a hierarchy of essences: to repeat the operations d) and e) until reaching the most general level of essence that is possible to achieve through an empirical process, putting in evidence the hierarchical relationships among the categories and elaborating the final coding system
- g) to recover and describe the absolutely unique data: since not all the data can be codified within the coding system, it is necessary to give value to the protruding data by commenting them in the final research report.

This empirical method has been directly elaborated from the critical interpretation of the Husserlian thought, but it also takes into account the contributions of methodological literature in the field of social sciences, with particular reference to the phenomenological empirical tradition (Barritt et al., 1983; Giorgi, 1985; Anderson, 1991; Angus et al., 1991; Moustakas, 1994; Ray, 1994; Creswell, 1998; Cohen et al., 2000) and the grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2014).

#### *The applications in empirical research*



After the theoretical foundation and explanation of the EPM, it is important to describe how it can be concretely applied in the empirical research. At this purpose, we will present two examples of application, in the fields of healthcare (Mortari & Saiani, 2014) and educational research (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2017; Mortari, Ubbiali & Valbusa, 2017).

- *The EPM in healthcare research*  
The first application of the EPM we would like to present concerns a qualitative research in the healthcare field, whose purpose was to identify what good caring in nursing consists of. The participants were 120 nurses working in several hospitals situated in the North of Italy. The instrument of data collection was the narrative interview: the participants were asked to narrate an event that occurred in their experience, in which they did a good action of care and another event in which they did a bad action of care. The process of data analysis, carried out following the EPM, allows bringing to light the gestures, postures and thoughts that characterize a good practice of care in nursing.
- *The EPM in educational research*  
The second application of the EPM we would like to present concerns a qualitative research in the educational field, whose purpose was to understand what care means according to kindergarten children. The participants were 116 4-5 y.o. children of some kindergartens situated in the North and Centre of Italy. The instrument of data collection was a Socratic conversation: after the presentation of a story, the participants were asked to dialogue about the meaning of care. The process of data analysis, carried out following the EPM, allows bringing to light how the children conceptualize care.

**Keywords:** Empirical Phenomenological Method (EPM), qualitative research, healthcare, education, care.

**Necessary resources:** video projector for ppt presentation.

#### Organization of the Panel Discussion

##### 1- Brief context:

In human and healthcare sciences, phenomenology is often assumed as the methodological framework for research in the field, but a dialogue with the theoretical foundations of the method generally lacks. We start from the assumption that a simplistic translation of Husserl's phenomenological method in the empirical research is not possible, because it is conceived for the eidetic sciences; instead, a critical interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology is needed in order to found a phenomenological method, which can be applied in the science of experiences.

##### 2- Objective(s):

- to discuss the possibility of a theoretical foundation of an empirical phenomenology starting from a critical dialogue with Husserl's thought;
- to present an Empirical Phenomenological Method (EPM) which is both theoretically founded and rigorously applicable in the human and healthcare sciences;
- to present applications of the EPM in healthcare and educational research.

##### 3- Dynamics / Strategy:

###### a. Presentation (Group Activity).

The Panel's presenters are members of Melete ([www.melete.eu](http://www.melete.eu)), a Center of Philosophy for Care that originates from the experience acquired by a group of



researchers of the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona (Italy). The research interests of the group concern phenomenological research and qualitative methods, applied to the fields of educational and healthcare sciences. In face of the ethical disorientation, educational poorness and political bewilderment, the Center is engaged in the promotion and realization of qualitative research, educational interventions and learning processes that, in the disclosed perspective of the ethic of care, can generate new cultures in contexts of primary value for life.

- b. Theoretical Exposition of the theme (define the content and time of intervention for each member; inform us who will be the moderator of the Panel):

Moderator: Dr. Marco Ubbiali

Prof. Luigina Mortari (30 minutes): The theory of empirical phenomenology and The Empirical Phenomenological Method (EPM)

Dr. Rosi Bombieri & Dr. Roberta Silva (15 minutes): The application of the EPM in healthcare research

Dr. Marco Ubbiali & Dr. Federica Valbusa (15 minutes): The application of the EPM in educational research

- c. Application in other contexts (describe here how the content of the Panel may be applied in different contexts or subjects):

The EPM presented in the Panel can be applied in several fields of qualitative research, in particular in the fields of educational and healthcare research, as it is presented in our examples of application, but also in sociological and psychological research.

- d. Discussion

After the presentation of the contributions (see point b.) there will be a space for discussion, lasting the final 30 minutes of the Panel. Questions can concern both theoretical and methodological issues, as well as the empirical applications of EPM and the data analysis processes which have been presented.

- 4- Application of the proposal in reality / practical examples;

In order to show the potentialities of the EPM, two contributions of the Panel will concern the application of the method in healthcare and educational research. The first research that will be presented aims to identify what good caring in nursing consists of, the second research aims to understand what care means according to kindergarten children. The steps of the method will be presented, with reference to both the data collection and analysis processes.

- 5- Expected results.

The theoretical foundation and the presentation of the EPM can stimulate reflections for the design of empirical research in several fields and the exemplified applications of the EPM can be assumed as models of rigorous data analysis process in qualitative research.

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### Biographical note

**Luigina Mortari**, Ph.D. in Education, is a full professor of Epistemology of Qualitative Research at the Department of Human Sciences and School of Medicine of the University of Verona (Italy). She is the Director of the Teaching and Learning Center (TaLC) of the same University. Her research interests include qualitative methods in educational and nursing research.

Among her publications:

- Mortari, L. (2015). Reflectivity in Research Practice: An Overview of Different Perspectives, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(5), pp. 1-9.
- Mortari, L. (2013). Writing Reflections: A Phenomenological Approach. *International Journal of University Teaching and Faculty Development*, 4(4), pp. 205-221.

**Federica Valbusa**, Ph.D. in Education, is Research Assistant at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona (Italy), where she teaches Educational research at the Combined Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in Primary school education. Her research interests include phenomenology and educational research.

Among her publications:

- Mortari, L. & Valbusa, F. (2019). Exploring Children’s Ethical Thinking: What Virtues Are and How They Can Be Learned. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9(12), pp. 128-135.



- Mortari, L. & Valbusa, F. (2013). Affective Responses and Personal Flourishing. *Phenomenology and Mind*, 5, pp. 66-73.

**Marco Ubbiali**, Ph.D. in Education, is Research Assistant at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona (Italy), where he teaches Epistemology of qualitative research at the Master's degree in Pedagogical sciences. His research interests include phenomenological method.

Among his publications:

- Mortari, L., Silva, R., & Ubbiali, M. (2019). A case of service-learning and research engagement in preservice teachers' education. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 23(3), 145-158.
- Mortari L., & Ubbiali M. (2017). The "MelArete" Project: Educating children to the ethics of virtue and of care. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 6(3), 269-278.

**Rosi Bombieri**, Ph.D. in Education, is Temporary Assistant Professor at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona (Italy), where she teaches Learning models from experience at the Master's degree in Nursing and obstetrics. Her research interests include the emotional and relational dimension in care and teaching contexts, Social and Emotional Learning and its implications for teacher training, ethics and citizenship education.

Among her publications:

- Mortari L., Bombieri R. (2020). The emotional and relational dimension in the teaching and learning processes at the time of Covid-19. *ICERI 2020 Proceedings*, pp. 6615-6622.

**Roberta Silva**, Ph.D. in Education, is Associate Professor at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona (Italy), where she teaches Theories and methods of the didactics at the Combined Bachelor's and Master's degree in Primary school education. She collaborates with the Teaching and Learning Center (TaLC) of the same University. Her research interests include qualitative methods in educational and nursing research.

Among her publications:

- Mortari, L., & Silva, R. (2018). Words Faithful to the Phenomenon: A Discursive Analysis Method to Investigate Decision-Making Processes in the Intensive Care Unit. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1).

