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## **Abstract**

**Aim:** The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the many research approaches related to phenomenology and their philosophical underpinnings. Reading about phenomenology can be difficult and challenging. This paper therefore, aims to provide some clarity for readers on a complex topic. The paper provides a 'map' of the philosophical influences on the many phenomenological approaches available to nurse researchers to choose from.

**Background:** Phenomenological research approaches are varied and often difficult to apply appropriately. All too often, researchers persist in "labelling" their studies as examples of Heideggerian or Husserlian phenomenology without fully understanding the implications of the underpinning philosophical assumptions.

**Data Sources:** Methodological sources related to phenomenology as a philosophy and phenomenology as a research approach are used to illustrate the range of phenomenological approaches and their philosophical underpinnings.

**Discussion:** The origins of phenomenology can be traced from the writings of Husserl and the advancement of his thoughts by Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. The importance of fully understanding a methodology and its philosophical underpinnings prior to using it, or claiming to use it, is emphasised. In addition, the variety of phenomenological research approaches that have evolved over the last half century are explored and placed in context of their philosophical underpinnings.

**Conclusion:** There is no 'one way' to undertake a phenomenological study. There are many approaches for researchers to choose from. However, this has also resulted in a range of labels and often different descriptions for the same approach.

**Implications for practice/research:** It is essential that researchers planning to utilise a phenomenological approach are familiar with the many approaches to phenomenology. This knowledge will assist in choosing the most appropriate phenomenological approach that best suits their study aim.

**Key words:** Descriptive phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology, lifeworld phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology.

## **Introduction**

Reading about phenomenology can be difficult and challenging. The language used in descriptions of phenomenology is at times impenetrable, and those new to the topic can struggle with understanding how the philosophy of phenomenology informs research approaches. This paper therefore, aims to provide some clarity for readers on a complex topic. The paper provides a ‘map’ of the philosophical influences on the many phenomenological approaches available to nurse researchers to choose from.

The origins of phenomenology are traced from the writings of Husserl and the advancement of his thoughts by Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. The many research approaches associated with phenomenology are clarified and examples of research studies illustrating their adoption are presented. Trends in the use of phenomenological research approaches in nursing over the past twenty years are also outlined.

The initial focus of this paper is on the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology and more specifically the differences between Husserl’s and Heidegger’s thinking. Distinguishing between Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology is key to understanding current debates on the use of phenomenology in research.

**Definitions and Schools of Phenomenology**The term ‘phenomenology’ may refer to a research method or a philosophy (Creswell 2003; Morse 1991). To add to the general confusion, the terms “phenomenology” and “hermeneutics” are frequently used interchangeably in the literature (Dowling 2004; Koch 1995), and there are several ‘schools’ of phenomenology.

Cohen and Omery (1994) identify three schools of phenomenology:

1. Edetic or descriptive phenomenology, guided by the work of Husserl.
2. Hermeneutics, also referred to as interpretive or existential phenomenology, guided by the work of Heidegger and Gadamer.
3. The Dutch (Utrecht) school of phenomenology, which combines descriptive and interpretive phenomenology and draws on the work of van Manen and others.

Cohen and Omery’s (1994) classification is useful; and despite its simplicity, recent developments in approaches to phenomenological research, comprehensively explored by Thompson *et al* (2011) can be housed within these schools. Phenomenological research approaches that have become popular over the past two decades, include Lifeworld phenomenology (e.g. Dahlberg *et al* 2001), and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith *et al* 2009). Although the latter is mostly utilised by researchers in the field of psychology, its increasing popularity among nurse researchers is evident (e.g. Harris *et al* 2011).

The schools and differing perspectives within these schools (Figure 1) demonstrate the multifaceted nature of phenomenology. All approaches however, have in common a concern with the lived experience (Cresswell 1998, Cohen 2000), and all originate from the philosophical views of Husserl and/or Heidegger, hence the emphasis on the centrality of the philosophical work of Husserl and Heidegger in this paper.

### **Husserlian Phenomenology**

The German philosopher Husserl (1859-1938) is credited with the initial development of phenomenology (Cohen and Omery 1994, Ray 1994, Draucker 1999, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009). Husserl's thinking was shaped by the Cartesian tradition (the assumption of a mind-body split) (Taylor 1994, Koch 1995), and the ideas of his teacher, Franz Brentano (1838-1917) (Crane 2004). Brentano (1874) argued that there is a distinction between mental and physical phenomena, which he called "*intentionality*" (Crane 2004). Crane (2004 p.31) explains Brentano's perspective

*"This term (intentionality) refers to the fact that any act of mind is directed to an object: that is, whenever someone wants, they must want something, whenever someone thinks, they must think something; and so on for all mental phenomena. Physical phenomena, Brentano argued, exhibited nothing like this intentionality."*

Husserl developed Brentano's thinking further; arguing that intentionality was the distinguishing characteristic of consciousness as "... *consciousness is always consciousness of something*" (Crane 2004, p.31). Conversely, it is assumed that there "*... is a phenomenon only when there is a subject who experiences the phenomenon*" (Sadala and Adorno 2002 p.283) i.e. meaning is projected onto the object by the perceiving subject (Johnson 2000). Consequently, object and subject are inextricably linked but

separate. This thinking led Husserl to conclude that it was not possible to study intentionality empirically (Crane 2004, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009). Hence the development of the phenomenological method, the goal of which was to study “*phenomena as they appear through the consciousness*” (Koch 1995 p.828). Essentially, Husserl believed the world could only be known through people’s thoughts (Porter 2000) and that there is no real existence outside the mind (Crane 2004). Reality therefore was assumed to be the ‘*life world*’ or ‘*lived experience*’ (Koch 1995, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009). Husserl’s focus was on finding the “*essence*” or true meaning.

Husserl believed it was possible to “*narrow*” one’s attention so as to be able to identify the “*rational principles underlying the phenomenon of concern*” (Taylor 1994 p.42). Narrowing one’s attention requires discounting what is already known or experienced about the phenomenon, what Husserl termed phenomenological reduction (also known as phenomenological epoché and bracketing) to get to its “*essence*” (Taylor 1994 p.42). Sarantakos (1993) explains that Husserl believed the world to be a highly ordered system and that this order is created and preserved by people. Husserl maintained that people are unaware that they in fact create this order, wrongly assuming it to be a natural phenomenon (Cohen and Omery 1994, Cohen 2000). Husserl calls this the *natural attitude* (Sarantakos 1993, Cohen and Omery 1994). Husserl considered the natural attitude a “*distortion that had to be overcome*” (Sarantakos 1993 p.47) if one was to get to and understand the *essence* or consciousness (Cohen 2000, Cohen and Omery 1994, Paley 1997). Husserl argued that to reach the “*essence*” one must ‘bracket’ out perceived reality of the world (Cohen 2000, Crane 2004, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009).

Phenomenological reduction (*bracketing*) is the distinguishing characteristic of Husserlian phenomenology (Sarantakos 1993, Cohen and Omery 1994).

In the context of phenomenological research, bracketing is described as the “*suspension*” of the researcher’s prejudices, preconceptions, and beliefs so that they do not influence the description of respondents’ experiences (Paley 1997, Stephenson and Corben 1997, Cohen 2000, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009). The objective is to literally ‘bracket’ out the natural attitude (Dowling 2007). Essentially, Husserl believed that after taking everything else out it was possible to identify the fundamental or basic nature (or essences) of the life world (Cohen and Omery 1994, Sadala and Adorno 2002, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009).

It is important to note that phenomenological reduction or bracketing implies that no judgement is made (Koch 1995). Eidetic phenomenology has as its focus the *description* rather than explanation of individuals’ “lived experience” (Koch 1995, Paley 1997).

### **Phenomenological research approaches guided by Husserl’s phenomenology**

The birth of a branch of psychology known as ‘phenomenological psychology’ heralded an exciting development in phenomenological research approaches. Phenomenological psychology merely draws its inspiration from phenomenology and is not a subfield of phenomenological philosophy (Polkinghorne 1989, Hein and Austin 2001). This movement was promoted by a group of American academics, based initially at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, which included Giorgi (1985, 1994), Polkinghorne (1989),

Moustakas (1994) and van Kaam (1959, 1966). Recent developments following the Duquesne school is the phenomenological research being undertaken at the University of Dallas (Garza 2007, Garza 2011) and Pollio *et al's* (1997) approach to existential-phenomenological research that has evolved from the University of Tennessee. This latter approach provides researchers with a 'framework' which focuses on the self (researcher), participants and the text, including guidance on the researcher undertaking a 'bracketing interview' with the research team before interviewing study participants and ongoing attempts at bracketing to "lay bare preconceptions" (Susleck *et al* 2007 p.12).

The Duquesne school of phenomenology follows the philosophical views of Husserl closely. The method adopted by this approach to phenomenology includes description, phenomenological reduction and the uncovering of a phenomenon's essence (Garza 2007). Merleau-Ponty also deserves mention here. Giorgi (2008) claims to be inspired by some of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) insights, resulting in an existential flavour to his phenomenological method (De Castro 2003). However, although Merleau-Ponty did describe a form of phenomenological reduction, it was not the same as that described by Husserl (Earle, 2010).

Giorgi's approach to phenomenological research has maintained its popularity among nursing and other health related researchers, especially in the Nordic states (e.g. Torheim and Gjengedal 2009, Snöbohm *et al* 2010, Thorkildsen and Råholm 2010, Berthelsen *et al* 2010). However, Moustakas's seven step method has had only limited popularity among nurse researchers (e.g. McNamara 2007, Hanks 2008, Chu and Hsu 2011).

### **The Lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*)**

The lifeworld, or *lebenswelt*, first articulated by Husserl, arose out of his views on the natural attitude (Dahlberg *et al* 2001). Similar views on the lifeworld are expressed by Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Husserl and Gadamer (Dahlberg *et al* 2001). This ‘parallel existence’ of some of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s thinking is in some part attributed to Husserl’s assistant, Fink, who attempted to reunite Husserl and Heidegger (Moran 2007 p.13). Previously, Heidegger’s existentialist views diverged from Husserl’s views on phenomenology (Langdrige 2007).

Phenomenological research approaches that label themselves as ‘lifeworld’ in focus include those proposed by Dahlberg *et al* (2001) and Ashworth (2003). Focus on the lifeworld seeks to elucidate its essential structures; and because of this, is similar to the method proposed by Giorgi (Finlay 2009). An increasing popularity of Lifeworld phenomenological approaches is evident among nurse and midwife researchers over the last five years, especially in Nordic countries. Examples of studies utilising Dahlberg *et al*’s (2001) approach include studies by Lundgren and Dahlberg (2002) and Martinsen *et al* (2009).

### **Criticisms of Husserlian phenomenology**

Paley (1997) is highly critical of Husserlian phenomenology. He argues that “... *the idea that it is possible to identify the ‘essence’ ... of phenomena must be judged unintelligible*” (Paley 1997 p.192). This criticism is in tune with broader postmodernist thinking which warns against the uncritical acceptance that perception, understanding or language are

literal and real in themselves. Postmodernists reject the notion of one truth, believing that “... *truth is constructed, both individually and collectively ... is multiple and shifting*” (MacDonald and Schreiber 2001 p. 40). Husserl’s objective to get to the “essence” or true meaning is at odds with this thinking. Although Husserl aimed to describe lived experience he was a positivist and motivated to produce “objective” data (McHenry-Connell *et al.* 2009 p. 10). This motivation may be at odds with the aims of contemporary nurse researchers. Paley (2005 p. 110) considers it “*odd*” that nurses continue to “*go on doing it*” [bracketing], when “*mainstream phenomenologists*” are expressing concerns that they do not know how exactly bracketing can be achieved.

Nurse researchers drawn to Husserl’s thinking would benefit from reading Finlay’s (2008) paper which explores the ‘phenomenological attitude’ and helps researchers place Husserl’s views in the context of undertaking a phenomenological study. Finlay (2008 p. 2) describes the ‘phenomenological attitude’ as a process involving the researcher ‘*engaging a certain sense of wonder and openness to the world while, at the same time, reflexively restraining pre-understandings*’. How this process should be undertaken however, is the topic of much debate (Lowes and Prowse 2001, LeVasseur 2003). Finlay (2008) warns that novice researchers commonly misinterpret this process of simply identifying and setting aside presuppositions, thus under-appreciating the “*complexity and discipline of the phenomenological attitude as a whole*” (p. 3).

## Heideggerian Phenomenology

There are distinct differences between Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian phenomenology (Koch 1995, Paley 1998, Cohen 2000, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009). Heidegger (1889-1976), a student of Husserl, contended that describing others' experience was not enough (McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009). He sought to see beyond the "... *normal, everyday meanings of life to see the larger meaning in Being*" (Cohen and Omery 1994 p.141). Heidegger was interested in understanding 'Being' or *Sein*, explained as presence in the world and *Dasein*, explained as 'being in the world' or 'being there' (Koch 1995, Crane 2004, McConnell-Henry *et al.* 2009). Heideggerian phenomenology seeks to uncover the hidden meaning (Cohen 2000). Heidegger was interested in moving beyond description to interpretation (McConnell-Henry *et al.* 2009)

Koch (1995) explains that while Husserl focused on the experience itself, Heidegger focuses on the experience of understanding. Put another way, Heidegger is concerned with ontological questions, while Husserl is concerned with questions of epistemology (Ray 1994, Koch 1995, McConnell-Henry *et al.* 2009). The key difference between Husserl and Heidegger centres on their stance on bracketing. Heidegger rejects the notion of bracketing (Crane 2004, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009), arguing that one cannot separate description from one's own interpretation. Heidegger, unlike Husserl, believed that presuppositions are part of being (Ray 1994, Crane 2004, McConnell-Henry *et al* 2009). According to Heidegger:

*"... we do not experience mere sensations abstracted from the real objects of the world; rather our experiences are of everyday objects in all their richness and complexity"*  
(Crane 2004 p.33).

Consequently, it is assumed that man makes sense of his world from the perspective of his own reality and is not detached from the world (Annells, 1996). Heidegger uses the term “*pre-understanding*” to describe the organisation of a culture, for example language and practices, “... *which are already in the world before we understand*” (Koch 1995 p.831). Pre-understanding cannot be bracketed simply because it is already there (Koch 1995).

Heidegger’s phenomenology has influenced a number of approaches. One such approach is that outlined by Diekelmann *et al* (1989) adopted by a number of nurse researchers (e.g. Barnett 2005, Yousefi *et al* 2009). Another popular phenomenological approach that has adopted the views of Heidegger, is that proposed by Benner (1994), also utilised by a number of nurse researchers (e.g. Mauleon *et al* 2007; Mohammadpour *et al* 2010).

Paley (1998) however, argues that nurses wrongly understand Heideggerian phenomenology as an interpretation of respondents’ accounts of an experience, which, he suggests, is a betrayal of Heideggerian phenomenology. He argues that nurses assume that respondents’ account of their experience is ‘true’ and cannot be challenged. This he suggests is overly simplistic. He also argues that nurses are in fact applying Cartesian principles by stripping “experience” off “world” thus implying that reality is not of interest. This is contrary to Heidegger’s fundamental belief of an indissoluble unity between the person and the world.

## **Hermeneutics**

Heidegger not only developed upon the writings of Husserl on phenomenology, he also further developed the work of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Dilthey (1833-1911) on hermeneutics. Hermeneutic phenomenology is simply described by Hein and Austin (2001) as a philosophy that aims to achieve understanding through interpretation and adopts a process that clarifies the phenomenon of interest in its context.

Gadamer (1990) and Ricoeur (1981) subsequently further developed Heidegger's ideas on hermeneutic phenomenology. Gadamer's views on acknowledging the sociohistory and culture of the researcher is attractive to many nurse and midwife researchers, evident in a range of research studies (e.g. Dowling 2008, Hunter 2008, Roche-Fahy and Dowling 2009, Yang *et al* 2010).

Ricoeur, a French philosopher, was influenced by Gadamer and Heidegger, and is accredited with offering the "*broadest*" analysis of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Ray 1994 p. 121). Ricoeur's work has influenced the development of a branch of phenomenology known as the Vancouver School of phenomenology (Halldorsdottir 2000). The Vancouver School offers useful direction to nurse researchers because of its 12 step approach (e.g Arman *et al* 2002, MagnUSDottir 2005, Skuladottir and Halldorsdottir 2011). Similar to the lifeworld phenomenology of Diekelmann *et al.* (1989) outlined earlier, the Vancouver School is also popular among nurse researchers in the Nordic region.

## **The Dutch (Utrecht) school**

Phenomenological approaches described to be from the Dutch (Utrecht) school combine aspects from the descriptive and interpretive schools. The Utrecht school of phenomenology is so named because most of the early activity in this school occurred at Utrecht University in the 1950s and 1960s. However, this label of ‘Utrecht school’ was not one adopted by those in the school but given to it by others (van Hezewijk and Stam 2008). Its philosophical stance arose from Husserl, Jaspers, Scheler (all phenomenologically oriented), and French existentialists, Sartre, Marcel and de Beauvoir (van Hezewijk and Stam 2008). Members of the Utrecht school were “interested in phenomenology as a practical and reflective method, not in phenomenology as professional philosophy” (van Manen 2007, pp. 22-23). Interestingly, there appears to be ‘two waves’ of movement in the Dutch school. An initial wave is evident in the 1960s before the emergence of the ‘Descriptive school’, when Dutch phenomenologists made frequent visits to Duquesne University and Giorgi, a teacher at the university, helped propagate Dutch phenomenology (van Hezewijk and Stam 2008). Giorgi later articulated his own version of phenomenological psychology that argued a clear distinction between positivist and phenomenological psychology (van Hezewijk and Stam 2008). A ‘second wave’ in the Dutch school movement is evident with the emergence of the writings of van Manen (e.g. 1997) in his descriptions of ‘phenomenology of practice’. Of note also is that similarities in van Manen’s writings with lifeworld phenomenology are made (Berndtsson et al 2007). In addition, Smith *et al* (2009) highlights similarities in van Manen’s approach with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Recent Interest among nurse researchers in IPA is evident, with a variety of studies using this approach

(e.g. Davies *et al* 2010), and it is argued that the use of IPA “seems certain to expand in coming years” (Pringle et al 2011 p. 24).

### **Exploration of the Appropriateness of Phenomenology for Nursing Research**

There is agreement that the primary intent of phenomenology is to *describe* phenomena (Spiegelberg 1970) or, in the case of Heidegger, to describe how phenomena are *interpreted* (Cohen 2000). This would suggest that phenomenology is the method of choice when aiming to understand the meaning of the lived experience of a phenomenon. Cohen (2000 p.3) agrees suggesting that phenomenology is most useful when the “... *task at hand is to understand an experience as it is understood by those who are having it*”. This appears to closely match the aim of much nursing research, which frequently focuses on understanding clients’ or others’ experiences.

Caelli (2000) makes a useful contribution to discussions on phenomenology; she explains that two philosophies of phenomenology have emerged, American and European phenomenology; evident in Figure 1. American phenomenology, represents a new, more practically focused way of applying phenomenological philosophy to inquiry (Caelli 2000). The focus of American phenomenology is on understanding “... *the reality of their experiences to the person as they engage with the phenomenon rather than the more objective reality of the nature of the phenomenon itself*” (Caelli 2000 p.370). Caelli (2000) believes nurses have moved away from traditional European phenomenology and have instead adopted American phenomenology to guide nursing research. This would appear somewhat evident in the range of studies highlighted in this paper. However,

Crotty (1996 p. 24) raises his concerns with the way nurse researchers undertake research labelled as 'phenomenological' and argues that a "*certain understanding of phenomenology has come to the fore in nursing and now stands more or less as an orthodoxy for nurse researchers*"

## **Conclusion**

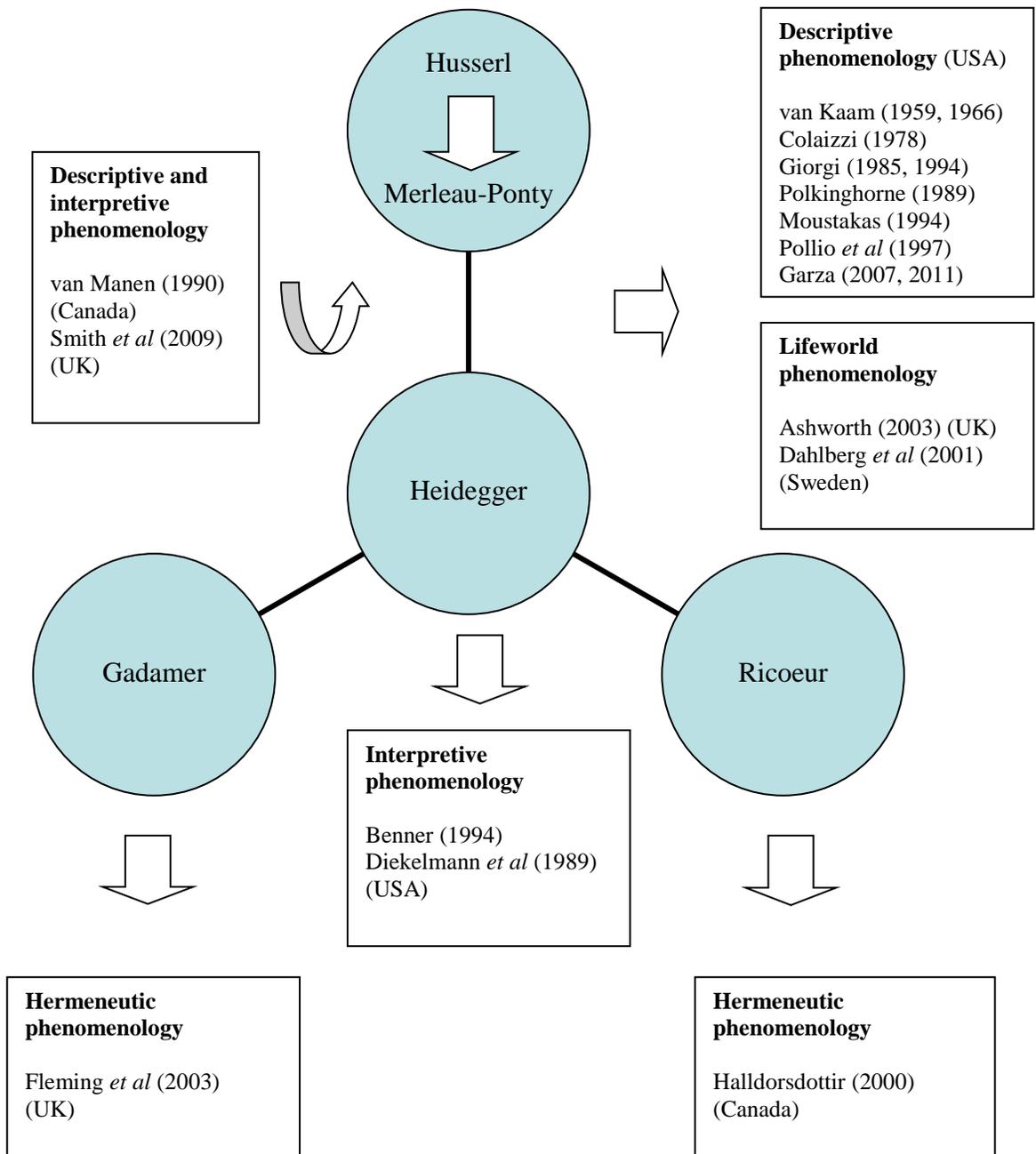
A common criticism of phenomenological research in nursing is the tendency by researchers to use its techniques and procedures without fully understanding the implications of the underpinning philosophical assumptions (Paley 1997, Paley 1998). The difficulty in interpreting the meaning of Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophical views makes this somewhat understandable. The confusion was exacerbated by the persistence of nurse researchers in describing their studies as examples of Husserlian or Heideggerian phenomenology when clearly they are not. However, this criticism may now be outdated because on reviewing the literature it was found that nurse researchers claims that their studies are grounded in the work of Husserl or Heidegger are infrequent (e.g. King and Turner 2000, Addis and Gamble 2004). Nevertheless, continuing confusion is illustrated by Norlyk and Harder (2010) whose systematic review of studies identified as 'phenomenological' reveals how nurse researchers use a variety of descriptions and often different labels for the same approach.

It has been suggested that methodologies should and must evolve (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). This evolution has indeed occurred in the way phenomenology is utilised across a variety of approaches (Figure 1). Indeed, '*one of the unique features of*

*research in a phenomenological orientation is its freedom from prescriptive methodology'* (Garza 2011 p. 55). The diversity of phenomenological approaches offers choice to nurse researchers but simultaneously requires cognisance of the philosophical underpinnings directing the choices made.

In conclusion, there is no 'one way' to undertake a phenomenological study. The choice of phenomenological approach is dependent upon a number of methodological concerns, such as the nature of the research question (Hein and Austin 2001). What is essential is to read widely and obtain a general overview of phenomenology and then select the approach phenomenology that best matches the study aim.

**Figure 1 Phenomenological approaches and their philosophical underpinnings**



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