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# **A Call to Better Qual: A Philosophical and Methodological Examination to Phenomenological Research**

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## **Abstract**

*In 2007, Kim Dooley advanced a conceptual framework for qualitative work within agricultural education. To date, little has examined JAE's adherence to this call or promoted opportunity to further develop qualitative research within AAAE. In answer to Dooley's call, we specifically explored the key tenets of phenomenology, JAE's published work using this methodology, and opportunities for writers and reviewers to grow in undertaking phenomenological work. After illuminating the historical and philosophical tenets of phenomenology, we engaged in a content analysis to examine JAE's adherence to the same. We offer this work as a guide and starting point for further development and rigor when using phenomenology to engage in qualitative work within agricultural education and propose recommendations to writers and reviewers looking to advance their phenomenological approach.*

## **Introduction**

"Life does not come to us like a math problem, but more like a story. There is a setting or context, there are characters or respondents, and there is conflict, or a problem to address" (Dooley, 2007, p. 33). In 2007, Kim Dooley exhorted the agricultural education professoriate to engage in qualitative research with rigor and quality. She argued that as a social science discipline, agricultural education research aligns with embracing tenets of qualitative paradigms. These include an interest in understanding the meaning people have constructed, participants' perspectives, researchers as instruments, fieldwork, inductive research, and rich description (Dooley, 2007). While the exhortation stands, adherence to its recommendations remains to be examined. This call is as personal as it is professional. Personally, we are constantly learning about the methods we employ and looking to help those we advise and teach grow in their methodological application. Professionally, we are looking to our peers to help us grow as scholars through our research discourse. While our manuscript is not an effort to discredit anyone attempting this methodology, we have found ourselves searching for opportunities to challenge our own research output and better participate as scholars in the field. The current manuscript was as much of a challenge to us as it is to the field.

We know qualitative research in education commonly employs basic/generic, ethnographic, phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study methods (Dooley, 2007). Since the publication of Dooley's article, narrative and discourse methods, among other critical qualitative methodologies, have become prevalent and should be included too. Dooley's content analysis and review provided a conceptual framework for engaging in qualitative research (Figure 1). To date, little has examined the integrity of upholding this framework within qualitative research in the *Journal of Agricultural Education*.

Anecdotally, as research committee members, we have fielded angst from our qualitative colleagues, and our own observations and participation in qualitative inquiry support our colleagues' concerns. We wonder if research engaging qualitative methodologies is accepted for publication at lower rates than quantitative research manuscripts. We experience frustration when recommendations we receive

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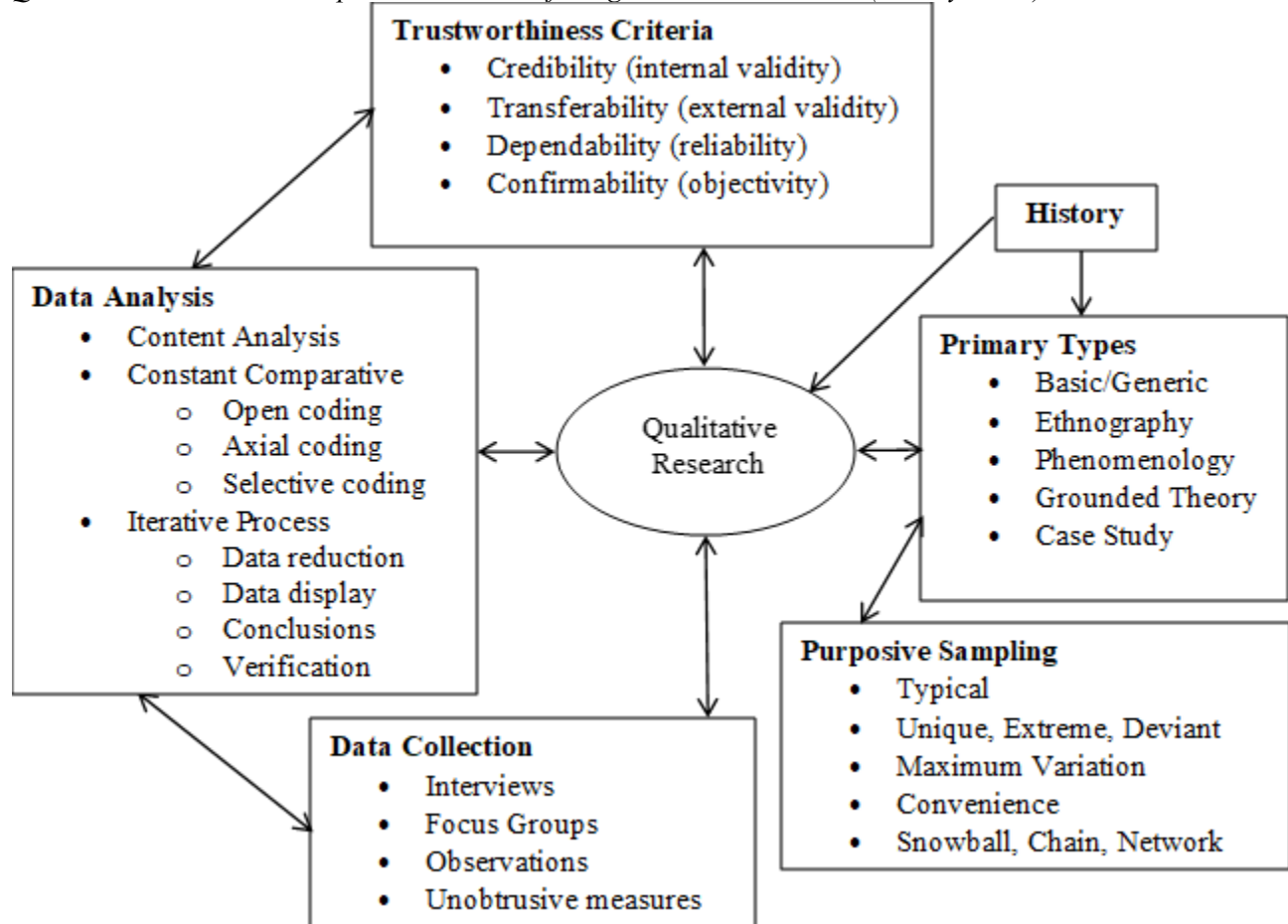
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from reviewers do not align with a phenomenological approach. We are concerned when research only loosely engaging these methodologies is upheld as high quality for our discipline.

**Figure 1.**

*Qualitative Research Conceptual Framework for Agricultural Educators (Dooley, 2007)*



Dooley's (2007) framework provides a starting point for understanding key differences between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Recognizing her audience largely participated in quantitative methodologies, her framework was educational. Additional work is now necessary within specific approaches to operationalize across the widely differing methodologies comprising qualitative work. Each methodology has additional nuance related to its primary types and what constitutes rigorous purposive sampling, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Knowing 15 years have passed since Dooley's (2007) exhortation, we took up the call to review the research since published in JAE to identify how our profession engages various qualitative methodologies. This approach recognizes the evolution from a largely quantitative field to one open to qualitative inquiry while examining the current exemplars of qualitative research in our profession. Our approach is part philosophical, part methodological, and necessarily educational. As qualitative researchers, we are constantly seeking more robust qualitative research approaches from ourselves and our colleagues in agricultural education. The time has come to understand how Dooley's (2007) call has been taken up, but more importantly, to understand how to continually better qualitative practice in our discipline.

Without a doubt, this effort is a huge undertaking. As we considered exactly where to begin, we were struck by the number of phenomenological articles and presentations we had recently seen in our profession. As qualitative researchers, we recognize and continually experience the complexities and nuances that make conducting rigorous phenomenological research particularly challenging. For these reasons, we decided to take up Dooley's call to improve qualitative research in the agricultural education profession, starting with phenomenology.

### **Purpose & Significance**

The purpose of this philosophical paper is to examine phenomenological research published in the field of agricultural education through a pragmatic lens. We aim to discuss this research with an eye toward improvement. We hope to add clarity to the hazy processes of phenomenology as a research method by providing a paper that can be used as an educational resource for our field. Much of the qualitative conversation within JAE is in its infancy. This work promotes conversation on a national level about the current state of qualitative research in the field of agricultural education and advances opportunities to engage in more rigorous and high-quality qualitative work.

### **Positionality & Aligning Assumptions**

Because the researcher is often the instrument in qualitative work, the work itself can be highly personal, and this review is as well. We teach and research using qualitative methods and have learned through the iterative processes and ambiguity that are hallmarks of qualitative research. We both work at Land Grant Universities in the mid-western United States, and this work aligns with our institution's mission related to teaching, research, and service.

In our qualitative research efforts, we find ourselves needing the suggestions and tools to follow as well. Our own attempts at phenomenological research are a published record of a need to move from a novice understanding to a deeper engagement with qualitative methodologies. Readers will see we have highlighted our own published methodological misalignments and discuss the challenges we have encountered in understanding phenomenology at several points in this article. Our positionality is not one of condemnation, but one of sharing what we have learned, in some cases, while we are still in the process of learning it. It is a positionality of continuous improvement; moving from well-intentioned work to better examples of implementing qualitative methodologies.

In our work, we have been struck by the vastness of individual methodologies within the qualitative discipline and offer this paper as an attempt to pare down an immense body of work into a meaningful and useful product for our discipline. This effort is a starting point, and the qualitative authors and philosophers we have cited throughout this article should be referenced for their specific contributions and approaches to phenomenology.

For our part, we are pragmatic in our approach to research. The best methods are those answering questions with integrity; there are a variety of ways specific methods are aligned to solving particular problems. Key to our review was understanding the alignment between research questions, phenomenon, theoretical framework, and approach. Additionally, we assume knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. Our interactions with the world result from our social experiences and cultural backgrounds. We recognize an objective reality with multiple interpretations and realities based on the multiple ways individuals experience the world. Ultimately, we are interested in authentic approaches that engage participants in working toward practical solutions.

### **Limitations**

This paper is limited by space and time to provide an in-depth review of phenomenology. However, an in-depth review is not our goal. We seek to provide a practical resource that can be used to help us all improve in utilizing phenomenological methodologies and encourage readers to reference those cited for deeper understanding of the nuances related to phenomenology. In the same way, our paper is limited by focusing only on phenomenological research. Similar work related to the other qualitative methodologies is necessary to advance research in our discipline.

Finally, our review of research focused on the Journal of Agricultural Education (JAE). We did not include regional or national conference submissions, knowing several of those were subsequently published in JAE. However, we also acknowledge high-quality phenomenological studies may not have been advanced from regional and national conferences. We have published phenomenological research in other academic journals and assume some of our colleagues are doing the same. Our analysis does not capture research outside of JAE, which says nothing of the nature or quality of work published elsewhere. This article aims to promote discussion of strategies to improve phenomenological research published in the agricultural education discipline.

### Situating Phenomenological Research

#### Understanding Phenomenological Research

Qualitative research in JAE is a relatively new approach to solving problems and answering questions. The first article using “qualitative” in the title appeared in JAE in 1992, just over 30 years ago. However, the use and acceptance of qualitative methodologies outside of agricultural education is more common. With strong foundations in philosophy, and disciplinary emphases in anthropology, education, political science, psychology, health sciences, social work, and sociology, applications and theoretical traditions can be as widely varied as the disciplines from which these methods develop. This work provides a rich practice to borrow from and potentially discrepant applications based on underlying philosophical assumptions in individual fields.

This imposes incredible challenge, as with wide use comes incredible nuance within and across qualitative methods. A discourse analyst may not be well-versed in the nuance of phenomenology, and a grounded theorist may not be well-equipped to review or advise a narrative manuscript. Specific to phenomenology, there are vast differences in the types of questions answered by different *families*, or traditions, of phenomenology. Phenomenology, as a philosophical tradition, began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to counter positivist thinking, which postulated knowledge could be measured objectively and without human interaction. Phenomenology, however, presumes knowledge is subjective and can be obtained from interactions between researchers and participants. Figure 2 outlines key features related to phenomenological traditions. Examining the philosophical roots of knowledge development is an important part of scholarship (Packard & Polifroni, 2002).

**Figure 2.**

*Differences in Foundational Phenomenological Traditions*

Philosopher	Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)	Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)
Phenomenological approach	Transcendental (descriptive)	Hermeneutic (interpretive)
Purpose	Describes “what it is like to experience...”	Interprets “what it means to be...”
Philosophical Focus	Epistemology (knowledge)	Ontology (meaning)

<b>Interpretive Framework</b>	Positivist view of understanding phenomena	Constructivist leanings
<b>Important concepts associated with writing and analysis</b>	<p>Description of a phenomenon that is clear, rich, and raw</p> <p>Use of <i>bracketing/epoché</i> to enhance neutrality</p> <p>Use of phenomenological reduction to distill and describe the essence of experiences</p>	<p>Interpretation of a phenomenon that takes context, tradition, and tradition (being-in-the-world) into consideration</p> <p>Use of researcher's own prior understanding of the phenomenon to enhance the research process</p> <p>Use of a back-and -forth approach between parts and the whole to create an interpretation</p>

For the purposes of this article, we focused on the origins of phenomenological research, examining the philosophies of “The Father of Phenomenology” (Edmund Husserl) and his student (Martin Heidegger). Most phenomenological scholars utilize the work of either Husserl or Heidegger as an “inspiration” for their work (Giorgi, 2000, p. 10), ascribing to distinctive features in one of the traditions while slightly deviating from or building on the original philosopher’s work.

We are intentional about pointing out where the methods of these foundational phenomenologists diverge. We believe this “back to the basics” approach is helpful for those wanting to gain a foundational understanding of phenomenology. We acknowledge there are many other phenomenological approaches we will not mention. Given our base-approach, we share Husserl and Heidegger’s philosophies as a starting point to understanding the foundations of phenomenological research from which to construct individual methods.

### ***Husserlian Phenomenology (Transcendental Phenomenology)***

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a mathematician, founded the philosophical movement of phenomenology as an alternative to the empirical, positivist approach to human science (Spiegelberg, 1982). He considered experience to be the basis for knowledge (Draucker, 1999). With a focus on describing phenomena, he believed people were conscious and aware, knowing about their own experiences, perceptions, thoughts, memories, imaginings, and emotions (Creswell, 1994). This was a radical approach at the time; one that was “ridiculed and laughed at” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25).

Husserl’s tradition is referred to as *transcendental phenomenology*. Transcendental phenomenology relies on an epistemological view of the world, assuming singular knowledge can be distilled into a pure phenomenon from collective experience (Dowling, 2007). Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology sets out to determine meaning, deal with the essence of an experience, offer insight into the essence of things through what appears and reflective description, and to obtain knowledge through thinking and reflecting (Farber, 1943). It emphasizes subjectivity, the discovery of the essence of an experience, and using only things “as they appear” (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl’s method involves referring to “the things and facts themselves, as these are given in actual experience and intuition (1975, p.6).

An important identifying feature of transcendental phenomenology is the researcher setting aside their presuppositions and understandings about a phenomenon. Husserl collectively used the terms *phenomenological reduction* (deriving the essence of the phenomena in study), *epoché* (removal of judgment), and *bracketing* (objective removal of the researcher's experience and meaning making) to describe this phenomenological attitude (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). These terms work together to eliminate a researcher's bias about a phenomenon.

Another core aspect of transcendental phenomenology is the use of *imaginative variation* to sort what elements should constitute the essence of the experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). A textual description then portrays the meanings and essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Those reading phenomenological research may frequently encounter the names Moustakas and Giorgi. These well-known scientists were greatly influenced by Edmund Husserl, and we find their texts helpful in understanding transcendental phenomenology at a deeper level. Although both authors have made some revisions and adaptations to Husserl's original approach, many of his tenets remain in their phenomenological methods.

### ***Heideggerian Phenomenology (Hermeneutic Phenomenology)***

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a student of Edmund Husserl, broadened phenomenology by focusing on "being in the world" instead of "knowing the world" (Reiners, 2012). Heidegger did not believe it was truly possible to set aside one's understanding and experience of a phenomenon, suspending previous understanding. Rather he contended investigators can ask deeper questions and better understand experiences through their own prior understanding and reflections (Dibley et al., 2020). Heidegger began to move phenomenology from pure description to interpretation through *hermeneutics*.

Hermeneutics originally focused on the interpretation of scriptural texts (Dibley, 2020; Crotty, 1998). *Hermeneutic interpretation* considers both experience as well as underlying dynamics and structures, intending to uncover what may often be hidden behind the objective phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). To begin grasping the foundation of Heidegger's way of thinking, one needs to wrestle with the concept of "*Dasein*" (Heidegger, 1927/1993, p. 20). Roughly translated into English, *Dasein* is "being in the world." Human existence (*Dasein*) can be interpreted and understood more deeply by examining language, culture, social situations, historical backgrounds, and everyday experiences (Benner, 1994).

In Heidegger's tradition, context shapes meaning; phenomenological thinking does not exist in a vacuum, but notices and considers outside events and influences. In Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, the voices of the researcher and participants together provide the way phenomena are illuminated and disseminated. Experiences and knowledge of the investigator become part of the findings, serving as valuable guidelines that add meaning to the research (Humble & Cross, 2010; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Heidegger (1962) argued all descriptions are already interpretations; we cannot help but understand the world just by being in it, and this colors all our own descriptions. His approach allows the researcher to 'bring certain background expectations and frames of meaning to bear on the act of understanding' (Koch, 1996, p. 176).

Well-known philosophers and human scientists whose research methods are grounded in Heidegger's philosophy include Gadamer (1976) and van Manen (1990), among others. Each of these individuals added to or edited certain tenets of the hermeneutic approach, but many of Heidegger's underpinnings remain in their writings. We appreciate the accessibility of both Gadamer and van Manen's texts and recommend those pursuing hermeneutic phenomenology spend time exploring these authors.

### **Situating Phenomenological Research in JAE**

With these tenets of phenomenology in mind, we turn to the Journal of Agricultural Education to review our (the discipline's) use of this methodology. We engaged in a conceptual content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; White & Marsh, 2006) to provide a snapshot of the publication of phenomenological research in JAE since Dooley's 2007 call. We sought to identify the existence of concepts in the given text (White & March, 2006), in this instance, phenomenological tenets conveyed in manuscripts in the Journal of Agricultural Education. The content analysis, in this case, grounded our recommendations to support scholars looking to develop their phenomenological research. As such, we have limited our discussion to the key findings as they pertain to opportunities to develop as phenomenological researchers. We will not quote specific articles, but instead use the content analysis to paint a general picture based on the phenomenological works published in JAE since 2007. While a content analysis would typically cite specific articles, we do not find it appropriate to publicly call out the methodological discrepancies or misalignments of our colleagues. Many of the phenomenological works included in this content analysis have contributed to the research base in the profession despite their methodological limitations. Rest assured; numerous methodological revisions falling in these parameters are ones we would like to make to our own published phenomenological manuscripts if we had the opportunity to do so!

We reviewed JAE since 2007 (the publication year of Dooley's call for more robust qualitative work in JAE) for articles using "phenomenology" and "phenomenological." We found 25 articles with these search terms from 2007 through November 2022. These were organized by author, title, and publication year. Using an Excel spreadsheet, we examined the articles to identify concepts, including family of phenomenology, theoretical framework, presence of hallmarks of phenomenology, year of publication, and identified phenomenon.

The 25 reviewed articles were written by 57 authors, with an average of three authors per manuscript. The majority of authors (43, 75%) were only listed on one manuscript. Nine authors had two phenomenological publications, and five had three publications. Ten of the 13 authors listed on multiple publications were listed as first authors. This variation in authors suggests many of the phenomenological research articles published in JAE were first attempts. Knowing our (the authors') first attempts (and subsequent efforts) had much room for methodological improvement, we acknowledge the complexity of phenomenological research, especially given how efforts in JAE continue to improve. The premise of our argument advances ways to continue developing beyond these first attempts.

Only one article in JAE from the last 15 years referenced a family of phenomenology. Four authors described their methodology beyond "phenomenology;" one author described their study as transcendental, one descriptive, and three hermeneutic (two by the same author). The rest made citations to Creswell (2013), Moustakas (1994), Crotty (1996), Stewart and Mickunas (1990), Moran (2000), Bogdan and Biklen (2003), van Manen (1990), Polkinghorne (1989), Lukes (2005), Lester (1999), Sloan & Bowe (2014), Lindseth and Norberg (2004), Lincoln and Guba (1998), Lopez & Willis (2004), McConnell-Henry et al. (2011). Without detracting anything from notable scholars in qualitative research, much of the citation in JAE focused on broad overviews from textbooks to general qualitative methodology, rather than specific ontological, epistemological, and methodological alignment. Many of these references aligned with specific forms of analysis or individual nuances of approach. In addition, five articles made no reference to the phenomenological methods with which the study aligned, and three cited case study methodologists (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2012).

Notably, I [Haddad] was one of the three that cited a case study methodologist without articulating a clear reason for drawing from multiple methodologies. Looking back at this initial attempt at phenomenological inquiry, I could not have told you that Merriam was a case study methodologist any more than I could have cited a phenomenologist to replace it with. At the time of undertaking my first qualitative study, I had no qualitative methods experience (from coursework or otherwise). I knew the researcher did interviews instead of surveys and that "think and rich description" was essential in writing the findings. I found words like "bracketing" and *epoche* and used them to describe my approach. In sharing this early

entry point, we again acknowledge our positionality in advancing this work. We are not seeking to discredit the findings of this type of work. Despite room for methodological improvement (whether by articulation or intention), there is still value in the published work explored in this manuscript. Our efforts, then, seek to bring together a qualitative community to support strong methodologies before undertaking the study. We do not purport to be the only members of that community; rather, we use this work to draw out others who can contribute to strong methodological work in our discipline.

The phenomena under study were often as in question as the theory employed to study it. Phenomena included ascribing meaning to time, teacher effectiveness, decision to teach, teacher collaboration, student apathy, involvement in agricultural education, resilience, decision making, content knowledge acquisition, mid-career teachers, international experience, female agriculturalists, learning, inquiry-based instruction, motivation, multi-membership, mentoring, and meaning of livestock production. Without alignment to families of phenomenology, we are not in a strong position to identify the above as phenomena but acknowledge these certainly may be. For example, in [one of the researcher's] early attempts, I defined the phenomenon as "learning." That certainly could be a phenomenon, but simply calling learning a phenomenon did not make my exploration of it a phenomenology. This example and the list above raise several questions. Regardless of the phenomena, and in light of the families of phenomenology outlined above, several of the articles did not identify "what it is like to experience..." (Husserl) or "what it means to be..." (Heidegger). Regardless of the family of phenomenology ascribed to (or not), little in the articles reviewed supported clarity in identifying the broader collective experience or specific meaning under study. This is where [the author's] example of "learning" as a phenomenon fell short. The study did not actually explore what it is like to learn through the teaching career or what it is like to experience learning through it. While framed in learning, the study focused on mobility. In fact, the study focused on *what it means* to experience changing schools! We are at a turning point for phenomenological research in JAE; exploring a specific experience does not inherently make research phenomenological. Rather, we need to consider this important question: "*What can we see when we look closely, deeply, around, and through the phenomena of interest?*" (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 7).

Certainly, we see continued growth and evolution in applying phenomenology in agricultural education research. For example, while early phenomenological research published in JAE reported the essence of the phenomenon as tables of participant quotes or bullet point lists, some recent authors have expertly shared poignant participant stories, interweaving their own descriptions and comments among these stories to help readers grasp the essence of the phenomenon. Considering the steep learning trajectory to move from heavily quantitative approaches to attempts at qualitative methodologies, we have come a long way from the tables of quotes required to begin this shift. Especially in the last five years, stronger attempts are moving phenomenology from the study of experience to an in-depth attempt to derive essence, distill themes, and intertwine theory with methods where appropriate. Phenomenological research published in more recent years tends to contain more characteristics associated with the methodological approach; in short, we are making progress as a profession. However, additional work is needed to support advancing phenomenological research methods in our discipline.

### A Call to Better Qual

As we have seen, phenomenology is a complex research methodology involving incredible nuance beyond "lived experience." Methodology is a tool that, if used properly, can help us do our work more effectively. If a tool is used improperly, it can still get the job done though the work may take longer, or the finished product may not be as solid. The same is true of qualitative research. Highly flawed phenomenological research may still contribute to the profession but may not uncover or illuminate as much insight as if it were conducted differently.

Additionally, we must remember that reading research articles is an important part of training for graduate students. The articles we publish are methodological teaching tools. We owe it to those who come after us to leave a well-informed methodological footprint they can build on. We intentionally chose to simplify this article to make it more useful to novice qualitative researchers. We know many currently conducting qualitative research are self-taught or minimally instructed in qualitative methodologies, and we share this review to grow and learn together. We commend those who have attempted phenomenology in agricultural education and look forward to continuing to grow in this methodology with our colleagues.

While we do not know when a concerted effort for qualitative training among our discipline's Ph.Ds. gained a foothold, we do know that even today, a few doctoral programs in Agricultural Education do not require qualitative methodology courses for their graduates. Of the sixteen programs with available course requirements for their Ph.D. programs, six did not list a specific qualitative course in their program guide. Furthermore, little exists to support continued and in-depth growth in qualitative methodology once scholars leave their graduate programs.

We are not suggesting those who have stumbled with employing phenomenological methods in the past should no longer engage in phenomenological research. On the contrary! We have experienced (and continue to experience) significant shortcomings in our own work and included our own JAE publications in those analyzed above. Arguably, our intimate awareness of these shortcomings better positions us to address them through a learning tool such as this manuscript. Research is an evolving process, and if researchers are willing to learn and grow in their practice, there is room for them to engage the methodologies necessary to advance teachers, communities, and students. In addition to a call for additional support for scholarly growth in qualitative methodologies, we also share the following recommendations to advance stronger writing in phenomenology and some best practices for reviewing phenomenological work.

## **Writing Phenomenology: Moving Beyond “Lived Experience”**

### ***Defining Experience***

A notable challenge across phenomenological research in JAE since 2007 was identifying a phenomenon. Phenomena include the entire human experience, both the easily observed and the hidden (Dibley et al., 2020). While a cursory look at a lived experience can be easily taken for granted, unpacking, or stripping away the initial meaning can help uncover what is usually unseen (Sokolowski, 2000). This effort takes us much closer to the essence of the phenomenon.

Most often in JAE, phenomenon was defined as a *lived experience*, but not unpacked in a way that took the reader to “the heart of the matter—that which is significant or meaningful” (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 8). Many phenomenological articles lacked thick description; one that captured the experience of the participant in its fullest and richest complexity (Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, most articles said little to nothing about “what it is like to be...?” (Husserl) or “what it means to experience...?” (Heidegger). Salient to this challenge in identifying phenomenon are subsequent and related challenges to situating methodologies historically and philosophically.

### ***Methodological Alignment***

We see from our review that methodological references are sometimes selected for alignment with a researcher's desired approach rather than philosophical alignment. Choosing a phenomenological research method that aligns with one's philosophical assumptions is vital for research credibility (Reiners, 2012). Furthermore, the process of writing about one's philosophical assumptions helps prompt critical thinking and reflection (Cohen et al., 2000). Authors may not know where to look apart from where they

have already been directed, so we see an abundance of cursory references without substance in JAE phenomenological articles.

I [Mott] vividly remember this misstep in my own learning journey. When I enrolled in my first course in phenomenological research, I remember incorporating citations from Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) alongside Heideggerian references. Without having any knowledge that these sources did not align; I had no means to correct my error before perpetuating the methodological inconsistencies. However, my professor, an experienced hermeneutic scholar, offered to meet with me and shared more appropriate and aligned references. Once I had been pointed to the appropriate resources, I clearly understood all phenomenological methods are not compatible with each other! To this end, we caution readers against pulling broadly from our list of references, as these include misuses of supporting authors from other articles. Instead, we encourage authors to review Figure 2 for direction in further study when employing Husserlian or Heideggerian philosophy.

To preempt alignment challenges in writing, we challenge authors to review Dooley's (2007) guide for conducting qualitative research in terms of the philosophical assumptions of the family of phenomenology best aligned with answering your research question. In drafting methods, review your phenomenologist's history, assumptions, and theoretical approach to the methodology. Identify others who have employed a similar approach as examples to support your means of engaging a phenomenological approach. Then explicate the alignment of the type of phenomenology you undertake in terms purposive sampling, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness criteria. This is certainly complex, iterative, and will vary by family of phenomenology and question. We would do a severe disservice to the profession if we attempted to simplify the complexity of phenomenology into a single figure to capture Dooley's (2007) key tenets. But we would not be offering a true call for better qualitative research if we did not vehemently encourage authors to engage this work in their own studies.

### ***Depth & Substance***

Another significant challenge across the reviewed articles was a lack of depth and substance. Most often, findings were non-revelatory, aligning with the research questions easily, and missing the dissonant and discrepant details qualitative research is poised to elucidate. While a challenge, this connects issues in identifying phenomena and philosophical alignment. If we are unclear on the phenomena being explored relative to our research questions, we will likely not unearth new, insightful, and revelatory findings.

Those publishing qualitative work in JAE may feel some angst at these recommendations, and perhaps rightly so. We are asking for additional elaboration and backgrounding while asking authors to uphold the "thick and rich" description of findings that is foundational to qualitative research. We would be remiss if we did not ask our conferences and journal to consider manuscript length implications related to our findings. Providing enough space to elaborate qualitative work is both necessary for understanding and educative for future endeavors. By not permitting substantial space for this type of work, we pass along a mediocrity that may not be reflective of the actual study rigor or clearly communicate the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Reviewing Phenomenology: A Non-Phenomenologist's Guide**

Since our review only addressed articles accepted for publication in JAE, we were unable (and not attempting) to make comparative claims between accepted and rejected articles. However, we know from our own efforts through the review process that quality work is often dismissed because it is misunderstood or does not easily align with the scoring framework. In addition, our pool of reviewers for qualitative work is limited to those who acknowledge a willingness to score related work. A discourse analyst may not be well situated to review phenomenological work (and vice versa), but they are willing to try. If we only

scored based on methodologies in which we were expertly versed, our review process would meet an unsustainable backlog and we would likely see even fewer qualitative publications in JAE. This is a complex issue, but one that may be alleviated to some extent with intentional focus on providing and participating in in-depth professional development opportunities. We are deeply grateful for those engaged in reviewing qualitative work, and offer the following, based on the newly proposed JAE rubric (2023), to guide the review of phenomenology.

### ***Impact of Contribution***

The new JAE rubric asks reviewers to make assessments of the article relative to the literature-supported argument justifying study importance, extension of what is known about the topic, importance of the contribution to the field, and relevance to current or emerging issues. Even here, methodological and philosophical alignment are critical. In considering qualitative work in JAE broadly, we appeal to reviewers to consider impact beyond findings. Particularly for qualitative research, and phenomenology specifically, the impact may be sound methodology. Perpetuating credible methodologies is a key impact scholars leave for each other in future studies. Strong methods advance our profession.

When reviewing for high-impact methods, reviewers may find wide discrepancy in the application of phenomenological approaches. For example, structures and theoretical frameworks may be entirely avoided in hermeneutic phenomenological work. Similarly, the order of inclusion may vary widely, recognizing differences in epistemological (Husserlian) and ontological (Heideggerian) approaches. Additionally, alignment is critical to methods contributing to our discipline's understanding of qualitative approaches. Data analysis techniques must align, including the language used throughout the manuscript. This alignment not only contributes to the study's impact on the profession but the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. For example, it would not be appropriate for Heideggerian phenomenologists to do member checking given the interpretive approach considering the views of both the participants and the researcher. Strong alignment in cited methodologists should persist throughout manuscripts, following the aligning means of addressing key aspects of the study.

### ***Academic Rigor & Accuracy***

Academic rigor and accuracy are defined by the new rubric as sound and accurate approach, context-aligned data collection and analysis, reasonable interpretation, accurate and trustworthy information, sufficient evidence, and address of limitations. This is perhaps the most obvious place for alignment related to methodology. Figure 2 provided a helpful starting point for both writers and reviewers in aligning key philosophers with their methodological contributions. There is far too much nuance among the families of phenomenology to unpack here, in-text. However, we can offer broad considerations and encourage authors to explicate their alignment with the philosophical assumptions of their chosen phenomenologist or philosopher.

All phenomenological research requires researchers reflect deeply on their own experiences. While transcendental approaches require researchers to attempt setting aside or bracketing out their own experience (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990), hermeneutic manuscripts should include how the researcher's understanding of the experience and context helped create the interpretation of the phenomenon (Dibley, 2020). Approaches to research project design, data collection and analysis should align with the family of phenomenology chosen for the researcher's work. This will further enhance the trustworthiness of phenomenological work. While general frameworks, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985), provide guidance to qualitative researchers in general, other frameworks designed for particular traditions of phenomenology (e.g., De Witt & Ploeg, 2006) may also be particularly helpful throughout the entire research process.

Phenomenologists may choose to use fieldwork or data analysis techniques from other qualitative approaches. However, when selecting these they must be appropriate philosophical matches to ensure rigor in the research (Cohen et al., 2000). Additionally, data collection and analysis sections should include appropriate methodological citations supporting the researcher's processes and decision-making. Indeed, the influence of the philosophical tradition should be evident at every stage of the research process (Dibley et al., 2020).

### ***Style & Structure***

Finally, the new rubric defines style and structure as organization supporting readability, clearly communicated purpose, effectively summarized conclusions, clear and correct writing, and completeness. We offer a special note as it relates to all qualitative research: Completeness (i.e., all relevant sections are included) may not follow the traditional introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, methods, findings, conclusions outline. In fact, in some branches of phenomenology, whole sections of the traditional manuscript would be inappropriate. For example, Heideggerian phenomenology does not typically include a theoretical framework because that structure forces a linear way of thinking instead of allowing revealing to take place, reflecting the complexity of what it means 'to be' (Dibley et al., 2020). We cannot overemphasize the importance of researchers thoroughly understanding the phenomenological tradition they choose to use and utilizing philosophically and methodologically aligned processes and structures.

It is incumbent upon authors to clearly communicate and align their methods. In fact, we encourage all submitting a manuscript to see this as an opportunity to help educate reviewers in the field (who are often also our colleagues) about phenomenological research. However, it is also incumbent upon reviewers to approach qualitative frameworks with which they may be less familiar with an open mind, welcoming the learning opportunity. We are well past the time to write qualitative work to a solely quantitative audience and score it from a quantitative frame. While qualitative researchers attempting to publish in JAE at the time of Dooley's 2007 call may have had to make methodological decisions they knew were inconsistent with their approach to fit the review criteria or to satisfy quantitative reviewers, that is not the case in 2024. That said, the style and structure of a phenomenology should align throughout the manuscript. There is little room for phenomenology to cherry-pick from widely differing schools of thought within or even outside of the methodology, especially in terms of what it means to engage with the phenomenon.

### ***In Conclusion***

Improving qualitative work across our discipline is a team effort. Instead of simply identifying themes, rich and rigorous qualitative work captures the layered, nuanced, and often discrepant voices that tend not to fit the patterns described via other methods. The essence of this article is on rigor in qualitative research, particularly phenomenology. Understanding phenomenological research, with its foundations in philosophy, is a challenging and sometimes overwhelming endeavor. Additionally, paper and conference submission requirements have historically been written in ways that did not allow phenomenological researchers to utilize appropriate methods and fully describe their approach or findings, meaning there were likely missed opportunities to describe and interpret phenomena in an impactful way that would resonate with the reader long after the article was put away.

Despite these limitations, researchers in the field have managed to design research that offers insight to advance the profession. The newly revised JAE submission requirements and conference paper guidance are friendlier to qualitative research in general. It is exciting to think about how this modification provides researchers and authors with the ability to conduct more impactful research while leaving a methodological footprint for future scholars in and beyond our profession. We highly encourage the profession to consider how to offer opportunities for those interested in learning, growing, and collaborating

in phenomenological methodology, along with other qualitative approaches, at regional and national conferences.

We know this will not be our last call to better qualitative research, and we hope it is not yours either. Even if you have not had experience with phenomenological research before, we encourage you to find more experienced colleagues in the profession with whom to collaborate. Engaging in the collaborative efforts to author this article has reminded us of the often forgotten need to bring methodological ignorance to projects in addition to methodological expertise. When teams of researchers all have expertise in the same area it is easy to assume readers will have the same level of methodological understanding. Authors subsequently write above the level of the target audience. Powerful collaboration happens when research teams include experts and novices in methodological traditions.

As the field of qualitative research continues to evolve and we grow in our methodological deployment, we must also be willing to explore work outside our discipline. We specifically call on authors and reviewers not to spread themselves methodologically thin. Rather, acknowledging our expertise may be in focused areas, we should feel incredible liberty to bring methodological experts to our committees and seek them out in our collaborations. Phenomenological approaches have been used in anthropology, political science, psychology, health sciences, social work, sociology, and other fields. The opportunity for growth and development through learning from other disciplines is too great to ignore. Much can be learned from exploring the methodology utilized in these disciplines. Attending a conference or other professional development opportunity specifically focused on one qualitative approach might be an excellent place to start. We will only advance our qualitative efforts by thinking differently about our alignment philosophically, methodologically, and collaboratively.

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