"You Can't Be a Hippie Forever!" – A Septuagenarian Makes Meaning from His PhD Pathway

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Abstract: This single-participant phenomenological study derived from an advanced graduate-level qualitative research course assignment in 2022. I investigated the graduate school experiences of a purposefully selected septuagenarian male PhD student at a large, Southeastern U.S. university. The well-established University of Tennessee Transdisciplinary Phenomenology Research Group (TPRG) method framed the study. TPRG acknowledges multiple philosophies but is situated in Merleau-Ponty's approach, which recognizes four existential grounds: Body, Time, Others, and World. Structured analysis of the interview transcript elicited numerous themes; I chose six for focus in this paper. The self-described "unusual ... lifelong learner" provided incredibly rich data that could be analyzed for numerous topical papers and explored through follow-up interviews.

Keywords: phenomenology, lifelong learning, senior-aged graduate student

Sohn et al. (2017) counseled, "Educational researchers must begin with a genuine question spurred by deep curiosity" (p. 129). The single-participant phenomenological research synopsized in this paper encompasses those characteristics, reporting an analysis of one individual's experiences as a senior-aged PhD student at a Southeastern U. S., Research-1 class, land-grant university. The study explored the participant's experiences and resulting perspectives on his corporeal world, his intellectual world, his age and life accomplishments, his awareness of synergy in every facet of his life, his dedication to learning, and his appreciation for connections with others. Each of those senses was defined further in its context as an existential ground in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy using the University of Tennessee Transpersonal Phenomenological Research Group (TPRG) Framework delineated in this paper.

The participant, identified in this research by the pseudonym "Phil," was in a truly uncommon role comprising student, employee, and independent business person with a variety of income channels. The study explored each of those roles from Phil's frame of reference and provided an analysis of his life experiences related to his graduate student engagement. Phil is male, aged early-70s, and an engineering PhD student. He has a corporate executive background in technological research and development. Phil actively invests in, and consults for, technology start-up companies. He also has legal training and represents intellectual property clients. Phil is a published author. He is an internationally ranked senior-aged athlete. He lectures extensively. Phil's direct and indirect language reflects personal pride. He described himself as "quite unusual" (Transcript Page 1, Line 22) and an "oddity" (Page 8, Line 24). Phil referred to his age several times in the interview, yet he repeatedly described feeling young. Phil was genuinely pleased to have the opportunity to share his graduate student and other life experiences.

Sohn et al. (2017) suggested researchers expect long blocks of monologue from participants. Phil was at ease and glib, so this study certainly met that mark. In fact, there is enough material in this single interview to create multiple focalized research reports and topical articles. Creating the research report, however, represented one of the most difficult writing assignments of my life. I am not challenged by the rudiments of qualitative research or requirements for creating robust, tenable reports that meet standards for academic writing. Rather, my challenge lay in setting aside my natural inclination to elicit a profusion of detail about fascinating individuals.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

In keeping with the course assignment for which this paper was prepared, it does not include a traditional literature review. Nonetheless, a summary of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks surrounding phenomenological research is in order. Creswell and Poth (2016) define phenomenology as a qualitative approach similar to narrative research, where researchers focus on events (phenomena) as they "collect, analyze, and tell individual stories and build awareness" (p. 74) and "ascribe meaning" to the components of individuals' experiences (p. 133).

This study's design uses the TPRG's "unique" framework, which has approximately 35 years' worth of established validity and reliability. The TPRG approach assimilates recognized philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer, but embraces the existential philosophy of Merleau-Ponty: a higher-order, "descriptive and hermeneutic" process where researchers examine study participants' meaning and experience in tandem (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 124). For educational research, TPRG includes the scholarship of van Manen (1990); however, van Manen recommends substituting researchers' taxonomies and redefinitions for participants' original language in antithesis to Merleau-Ponty's preference for original voices (Sohn et al.).

Research Background & Problem Statement

As introduced above, TPRG's approach centers on the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (Sohn et al., 2017) with procedural "Steps" refinements (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 45). Sohn et al. stress Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that the participant's "perception is primary" (p. 125). The researcher's role includes extracting "[e]xistential themes...that constitute the grounds of human experience in the lifeworld," then expressing those themes in simpler language for the research report (p. 125). For Merleau-Ponty, interviews represent "true dialogue" — opportunities for researchers and participants to find common ground (S. P. Thomas, class lecture, January 27, 2022). Thomas observed, "Phenomenologists have the most humility because they can't presume to create an interview protocol."

The crux of a phenomenological study following TPRG's Framework is defining what is figural to the participant. "Figural," in this instance, is an object or phrase representing a concept or belief that dominates the participant's statements. The figural aspect is most often expressed as a metaphor in the interview. Otherwise, the researcher identifies the figural aspect through repetitive references. Researchers cannot know what is figural until they review transcripts (S. P. Thomas, class lecture, January 27, 2022).

Sohn et al. (2017) defined TPRG's Framework, in which researchers focus on four existential grounds or constructs identified by Merleau-Ponty: Body, Time, Others, and World. The *Body* is the fundamental category for understanding an individual's interconnections with remaining grounds. *Body* represents intentionality and the participant's context — that which anchors individuals to their environments. *Time* is subjective temporality and relationality, not as measured by traditional chronometric tools. The *Others* represent connections to other humans that mitigate the participant's feeling alone. Researchers must "give careful attention to other people who appear in participant narratives of lived experience" (p. 127). The *World* represents the participant's surroundings — space and place, security and freedom, society and culture — in the moment captured by the interview. The World construct exists "before we begin to reflect upon it" (p. 127). Humans are in and of the World, and it is in "all the everyday objects and things humans encounter" (p. 127).

The present research responded to a PhD-level advanced qualitative research course assignment: Interview a graduate student about graduate school experiences, then use the TPRG Framework to generate a single-subject phenomenological study and report. The assigned interview question was, "What stands out about your graduate student experiences [the phenomenon]?"

Research Method

Bracketing

Thomas and Pollio (2002) established *Steps for Doing a Phenomenological Research Project* (p. 45). These steps provide structure to the TPRG approach, which proclaims the interview and analysis processes create an "intimate connection," requiring researchers to "refrain from theorizing about [participants] before we come to know them" (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 124). Thomas and Pollio delineate a sequence of foci for every research study, beginning with the interviewer ("Self as Focus"), where bracketing of researchers' biases and assumptions occurs. In a larger study, bracketing includes an interview of the researcher by an experienced phenomenologist (Sohn et al.). The time available to complete the course assignment did not permit external bracketing interventions. Most of my self-ascribed bracketing (Goldberg, 1997) occurred as a reflection on the conversation and my reactions to Phil's statements. The scholarship supports post-interview bracketing (Fischer, 2009).

Bracketing produces objectivity and enhances reflexivity as the researcher considers her role and position as *bricoleur* in its evolved interpretation within the larger sphere of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4). The phenomenological interview procedure was a much greater concern in my post-interview bracketing. I have interviewed hundreds of individuals in multiple countries for a wide array of purposes, spanning from my teenage years to the present. I unwittingly practice a more phenomenological style in terms of wanting to capture the essence of subjects' stories. Unfortunately, I primarily employ a procedural modality based on investigative interviewing, and that structure was difficult to shed when I performed as a phenomenologist in the present study.

Participant Sample and Selection

The study reported herein contains a single subject selected through purposive sampling. Curious about graduate degree-seeking students aged 65 and above — while cognizant of FERPA and the

assignment's due date — I asked the university Registrar's senior-aged student services contact to e-mail a request on my behalf to random students. The first respondent met the criteria for my assignment, so I selected him. I could not have idealized a better candidate, nor could I have predicted the extraordinary effect our serendipitous encounter would have on my life.

While there is an entire universe of literature on sample sizes in qualitative research, the special nature of this study-as-assignment and the resulting quality of collected data supported my limitation to a single subject. Morse (2000) recognized the "inverse relationship" between "useable data" and the "number of participants" (p. 4), and that was certainly true in the interview transcript from Phil. Patton (2002) stated purposive sampling requires theoretical saturation, which Malterud et al. (2016) argued is better-described as "information power" contained in "the contribution of new knowledge from the analysis," which "must be evaluated continuously during the research process" (p. 1759). In the present study, "new knowledge" from Phil's experiences has implications for broad application and further study of senior-aged graduate degree-seeking learners.

Participant Interview

We arranged the Zoom-based interview at a convenient time for Phil. The approximately one-hour conversation was dialogue-style preferred by the TPRG Framework, wherein the interviewer "refrains from theorizing" before the meeting, is supportive and receptive, engenders an "intimate connection," and is alert to nuances in speech while observing nonverbal communications for clues (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 124).

TPRG's Framework suggests phenomenological interview questions be broad, eliciting tendrils of feelings and reactions to events and experiences, with a strong reminder, "The interview question must help them to speak from their first-person perspective of what it is like for them" (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 129). Unlike other approaches and methods, phenomenologists do not prepare a series of questions in advance of the interview, nor do they ask "how" or "why" questions. Thomas suggested simply asking instead, "What stands out about [the phenomenon]?" If redirection or prompting is required, Thomas recommended, "What stands out about [a particular described component]?" She encouraged researchers to note "aside" remarks and nonverbal cues for prompting as needed (S. P. Thomas, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Once we completed the interview, Zoom generated an automated, rudimentary rendering of the transcript text. I then carefully reviewed the transcript while watching the video to make necessary corrections and add "paralinguistic features" (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 134). I asked Phil to clarify jargon and specific details to ensure accuracy. I also reviewed and annotated field notes as to my observations and reactions, which notes were necessarily limited by the Zoom platform.

Data Analysis

The TPRG Framework embeds a three-phase data analysis model by the researcher, which I describe as procedural objectives in this report.

Objective 1: Read for a "Sense of Whole" and Define "Meaning Units"

Sohn et al. (2017) reported TPRG's approach is to parse transcription text word-by-word and line-by-line to "...hear what it says..." (pp. 135-136). They continued, "Capturing the essence of a phenomenon involves scrupulous attentiveness to the particular words, metaphors, and phrases chosen by participants to describe their experience" (p. 135). Thomas and Pollio (2002) stressed the importance of observing participants' use of metaphors, similes, and colloquial substitutions.

The participant's words, phrases, and reactions constitute "meaning units" – the "'micro' aspects" of words and phrases that represent "the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Sohn et al., 2017, p. 136). Larger strings, or "'macro' aspects" of text, represent patterns that may evolve into themes as analysis continues (Sohn et al., p. 136). Thomas and Pollio (2002) recommend reading for the "sense of whole" and delineation of meaning units occur simultaneously.

I then prepared an anonymized version of the transcript to share with classmates. TPRG's method incorporates a *group read* and discussion during a regular meeting (Sohn et al., 2017), but the present assignment required a narrow, guided approach. Sohn et al. suggested hearing the text read aloud makes it experiential. Further, subsequent discussions among peers provide an opportunity to identify particular words, phrases, and reactions and analyze why the item created a group member's reaction. Connecting content to other studies or resources may enrich discussions. Each researcher autonomously determines whether group-identified meaning units are relevant to the study.

Objective 2: Determine what Is "Figural" to the Participant

Sohn et al. (2017) wrote, "Thematic structures, when well executed, reveal the essence of an experience and its context. The structure reveals that the themes are natural lines of fracture in the figure, set against a ground, which is our interpretation of the phenomenon" (p. 140). For Phil, learning emerged as the figural component. He repeatedly referred directly or euphemistically to education-related concepts. Phil described himself as a lifelong learner moments after we established the connection: "...new experiences are ... As a lifelong learner, it's always new, right?" (Transcript Page 1, Line 8). Phil repeated the concept in the first few sentences of his self-introduction: "I never stopped learning" (Page 2, Lines 10-11). About midway in the interview, Phil described his reaction to the voracious learning of his grandchildren: "What a perfect thing to watch – when you're a lifelong learner at [over 70] – to watch a five-year-old, ask ... you know ... ask you questions ... about ... you know ... anything (Page 14, Lines 9-10). A few minutes later, Phil said, "It's like I'm the real McCoy when it comes to a lifelong learner" (Page 15, Lines 25-26).

Objective 3: Identify Existential Grounds or Constructs Represented by Themes

The transcript produced 170 meaning units. I created a taxonomy of keywords and phrases from the meaning units, dividing the identified components into Merleau-Ponty's four existential grounds — Body, Time, Others, and World — in anticipation of identifying themes from the text and correlating them to the existential grounds (Sohn et al., 2017). I also identified Phil's remark that contained the essence of his experiences, which the TPRG Framework suggests lends itself to the title of a study report:

> "Well, yeah, you have to realize that one of the things I'm not very good at is perceiving my own age. I actually forget. I forget it. I'll ... I'll talk to somebody like I'm a teenager sometimes, and then I think "No [laughter]. This is not ... this is not right." ... you know ... I mean, you just can't be a hippie forever." (Transcript Page 14, Lines 14-18)

Identification of Themes

Six themes emanated from the transcript's 170 meaning units. The themes represented all four of Merlau-Ponty's existential grounds, enumerated as Body ground = 6 themes; Others ground = 2 themes; Time ground = 5 themes; World ground = 4 themes.

Theme 1:	Gratitude	Grounds: Body, Others
Theme 2:	Excitement	Grounds: Body, Time, Others
Theme 3:	Persistence, Journey	Grounds: Body, Time, World
Theme 4:	Social Connections	Grounds: Body, Time, Others, World
Theme 5:	Ambition, Drive	Grounds: Body, Time, World
Theme 6:	Age, Relevance	Grounds: Body, Time, World

Conclusion

Citing van Manen (2014), the TPRG method maintains research reports must "induce wonder" and appeal to "cognitive and noncognitive modes of knowing." Readers must be moved and engaged by the "alive" voices (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 141). This interview experience changed the researcher's and participant's lives in measurable, positive ways. Presentations drawn from this single-subject study have inspired scores of readers and listeners. Unwittingly, this assignment evolved into a quasi-pilot study for my dissertation, which will be a full phenomenological study of senior-aged degree-seeking graduate students to explore the themes present in their graduate school experiences using the TPRG Framework.

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