

Chapter 9

Applying Hermeneutic Phenomenology to Understand Innovation Adoption

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author examines phenomenology and hermeneutics as research traditions and proposes a philosophical basis for their use. The author develops an iterative research process model that meets the needs of socio-technical research into technical innovation. This rigorous hybrid methodology is called hermeneutic phenomenology and is shown to be an excellent approach to dealing with the search for understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-technical approaches to understanding innovation adoption at core rely upon finding meaning from data that must be interpreted. In this paper a theoretical discussion will seek to uncover the philosophical issues of the search for meaning using critical hermeneutics within a phenomenological framework. The discussion will suggest a way of framing research so that a level of trust can be associated with research outcomes.

CONSTRUCTIONISM AND INTERPRETIVISM

Crotty defines constructionism as “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

Motivation for research is often to construct new understandings associated with a phenomenon rather than confirming and testing existing conceptualisations and theories. Research of this nature is appropriately constructionist.

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The concept of “researcher-as-bricoleur” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) describes eloquently the process of constructing meaning from disparate heterogeneous collected objects that will “contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize”. Thus the construction of meaning will come from the interpretation of the research data which has already been socially constructed.

Understanding and interpretation then become the goals of this constructionist approach to the data suggesting a theoretical perspective of interpretivism. The understanding and interpretation go hand-in-hand as one feeds the other. As understanding develops then one can begin to interpret and examine potential relationships between the components of the data. As one’s interpretation of the material develops then so does a better understanding of the problem at hand.

The research question is interested in understanding people’s actions in their socio-organisational context. Understanding will involve interpreting reality (interpretations) as it appears to people (constructions) in their workplace.

PHENOMENOLOGY AS A RESEARCH TRADITION

Engagement with the individuals who are closest to the innovation under investigation requires the asking of questions, participation in discussions and most importantly, capturing, ordering and interpreting their views and opinions.

And thus a phenomenological philosophical approach to the interpretive theoretical approach is suggested. “Phenomenology invites us to set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking... to learn to see what stands before our eyes” (Husserl, 1931, p. 43). This suggests we must critique what we find, not to challenge the

phenomena themselves, but our interpretations and understandings and to seek reinterpretation as a new meaning or a fuller meaning or even a renewed meaning (Crotty, 1998).

The research question seeks understanding of the innovation being an aspect of the interactions between individuals and groups in an organisational setting. The development of this understanding will flow from discussions and interviews conducted with individuals who are experts in the innovation and problem domain. Understanding is something that develops as more and more information is contributed to a problem domain. The development of understanding is a complex process that deals with acquiring new pieces of knowledge pertinent to the issue under investigation, examining these pieces, reconciling them against the newly developing understanding and adjusting one’s broader view, or horizon, to maintain consistency between the individual fragments of knowledge and the developing horizon.

The lived experiences and opinions of senior executive practitioners people are difficult to probe with surveys and questionnaires as experiences and opinions can often yield surprising and unexpected outcomes that might lead the research and discussions into hitherto unexpected areas (Walsham, 2006). It is the rich and sometimes unexpected data that we search for – lived experiences and professional opinions.

Phenomenology describes the situation where the researcher encounters a “phenomenon” and then experiences it, reflects upon it, then forms an interpretation of it (Husserl, 1931). Husserl insists that one should seek reinterpretation and perhaps a renewal of meaning of the phenomenon.

Phenomenology demands of the researcher a clear mind that allows a newer, fuller and a renewed meaning being constructed, the development of a deeper understanding requires an additional philosophical approach that builds meaning from repeated encounters with phenomena (Spiegelberg, 1982).

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