

The Application of Phenomenological Research Methods in Library Work: Postprint

Authors: Li Xinxin, Li Xiaoyan, Zheng Fei

Date: 2023-07-26T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Focusing on the application of phenomenological research methods in library work, this study organizes and analyzes representative domestic and international literature to deepen understanding of this method and provide beneficial insights for library scholars to conduct phenomenological and other qualitative research in the future. [Method/Process] Through a comprehensive retrieval strategy, relevant domestic and international research literature was obtained to explore topics including phenomenology and phenomenological methods based on library work, comparisons between phenomenology and grounded theory research methods and ethnographic methods, application practices in libraries, and finally propose specific application strategies. [Results/Conclusion] The study concludes that the current application scope of phenomenological methods mainly includes phenomenology in user information literacy; relevant practical experiences in information service work of library personnel; interaction research in knowledge management and knowledge creation processes; and studies on the interaction between human information behavior and technology. Finally, it summarizes the application modes, application steps, difficulties and challenges, and strategic recommendations in libraries to enrich the methodological system of library work research.

Full Text

Preamble

Li Xinxin^{1,2}, Li Xiaoyan^{1,2}, Zheng Fei^{1,2}

¹National Science Library, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100190

²Department of Library, Information and Archives Management, School of Economics and Management, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100190

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper examines the application of phenomenological research methods in library work, systematically reviewing and analyzing representative literature from China and abroad to deepen understanding of this approach and provide valuable insights for library scholars conducting phenomenological and other qualitative research. **[Method/Process]** Through comprehensive search strategies, relevant domestic and international studies were identified. The paper discusses phenomenology and phenomenological methods in the context of library work, compares phenomenology with grounded theory and ethnographic methods, examines practical applications in libraries, and proposes specific implementation strategies. **[Result/Conclusion]** The study finds that phenomenological methods are currently applied primarily in four areas: phenomenology in user information literacy; practical experiences of library staff in information services; interactive research on knowledge management and knowledge creation processes; and studies on the interaction between human information behavior and technology. The paper summarizes application modes, procedures, challenges, and strategic recommendations for phenomenology in libraries, thereby enriching the methodological toolkit for library work research.

In recent years, “phenomenology” has frequently appeared in library science associations and major international conferences, including the 80th Annual Meeting of the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) and the 2017 European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL). Phenomenology was first introduced by philosopher Edmund Husserl in his 1901 work *Logical Investigations* and subsequently became dominant in 20th-century philosophy of social science [1]. Current scholarship understands phenomenology in three ways: as a philosophical concept, as a social research method, or as a combination of both perspectives depending on specific research needs [2].

1 Theoretical Study of Phenomenological Methods

1.1 Phenomenology and Phenomenological Methods

As a philosophical theory, phenomenology emphasizes a “return to the things themselves,” suspending all assumptions and preconceptions to eliminate the influence of abstract theories on human understanding and thereby reveal the essence of phenomena [3]. Following Husserl, various philosophers developed distinct schools—including transcendental, psychological, hermeneutic, experiential, and existential phenomenology [4]—collectively constituting a broad phenomenological tradition. As a concrete research method, phenomenology provides systematic procedures for grasping the meaning and essence of phenomena through lived experience. This methodological approach has been widely applied across education, sociology, literature, aesthetics, and clinical medicine to solve practical problems. Increasingly, library science scholars recognize the practical nature of phenomenological methods and apply them to research and

practice. This paper therefore focuses on the application of phenomenological research methods in libraries, exploring relevant theories and practical applications to enrich methodological understanding and provide reference for solving real-world library problems.

Phenomenological research distinguishes itself by examining phenomena from the perspective of research participants, striving to capture their authentic experiences. C. Moustakas notes that phenomenological methods “seek essences in commonly experienced phenomena, analyzing themes of subjective experience, personal motivation, and action that ordinary observation cannot reveal” [5]. J.W. Creswell and colleagues define phenomenology as an approach that “focuses on the lived experiences of people who have shared a common situation, examining consciousness that has not yet been analyzed or theorized” [6]. In summary, phenomenology emphasizes subjective experience over objectivity, description over analysis, and interpretation over measurement, recognizing that different people may hold different views of the same phenomenon at different times.

1.2 Comparative Analysis with Other Methods

Phenomenological methods can be distinguished from other qualitative approaches by their focus on the intrinsic structure of consciousness underlying observable behavior. In library research, where grounded theory and ethnography are already widely used, this section clarifies phenomenology’s distinctive features through comparison.

1.2.1 Phenomenological Method vs. Grounded Theory Both phenomenology and grounded theory employ bottom-up, in-depth investigation and avoid preconceived theoretical assumptions, maintaining flexibility throughout data collection and analysis. However, they differ significantly in sample selection, data analysis, and application outcomes [7], as shown in .

Differences Between Grounded Theory and Phenomenological Method

Dimension	Grounded Theory	Phenomenological Method
Theoretical Sampling	Theoretical sampling with cumulative selection, building on previous interviews	Purposeful selection of participants with broad homogeneity, sample size determined by informational sufficiency
Data Analysis	Constant comparative method for coding and categorization, allowing hypothesis generation	Focus on understanding how individuals perceive experiences, not necessarily producing theory

Dimension	Grounded Theory	Phenomenological Method
Application Effect	Emphasizes theory generation from collected data	Provides interpretation of experience meanings, not necessarily the best explanation

1.2.2 Phenomenological Method vs. Ethnography Ethnography, rooted in anthropology, involves researchers immersing themselves in a field to obtain primary data through observation and participation, examining research questions within broader social contexts [8]. Originating with F. Boas in 1886 and developed by B. Malinowski, ethnography shares with phenomenology an emphasis on description and interpretation. However, they differ in theoretical foundations, descriptive content, and modes of explanation, as shown in .

Differences Between Ethnographic and Phenomenological Methods

Dimension	Ethnographic Method	Phenomenological Method
Theoretical Foundation	Anthropology emphasizing emic/etic perspectives through observation	Philosophy describing structures of human consciousness
Descriptive Content	Holistic description of groups or processes in macro environments	Focused themes from lived experiences, where part and whole are inseparable
Explanation Mode	Generates and validates theoretical models	Provides possible interpretations of experience meanings

2 Application Status of Phenomenological Methods in Libraries

Library scholars have applied phenomenological methods to practical research, recognizing that quantitative approaches alone cannot fully understand users' purposes and motivations. J. Budd explored phenomenology's appropriateness for library and information science, particularly its utility in analyzing information needs—while two people rarely express ideas identically, universal concepts emerging from data serve as evidence of shared experience [11]. Phenomenology transforms information into knowledge by describing meaning-making processes at the intersection of physical reality and participants' psychological worlds.

2.1 Theoretical Research Status

2.1.1 International Research International studies explicitly employing phenomenological methods in library work were identified in the Web of Science Core Collection. Using keywords such as phenomenology, phenomenological method/approach/study/research combined with library/librarianship/library

science (search date: September 24, 2018), and limiting results to information science and library science research articles and reviews, 53 representative papers were selected. The number of phenomenological studies in library science has increased annually, particularly since 2000. M. Itoga first mentioned social phenomenology in 1991 to classify human understanding in information provision contexts [12]. J. Budd's 2005 work significantly influenced the field by examining which information science research areas could benefit from phenomenology, offering new ways to conceptualize human-information relationships [11].

Publications are concentrated in seven countries with more than two papers each, primarily the United States, Canada, and Finland [Figure 1: see original paper]. Among journals publishing at least two such papers, *Journal of Documentation* has the most publications [Figure 2: see original paper].

2.1.2 Domestic Research A CNKI search using terms like “phenomenology,” “phenomenological method,” “library,” and “library work” within the “Library and Digital Library” discipline yielded 12 relevant articles (search date: November 13, 2018). Domestic research focuses primarily on philosophical exposition; practical application remains underdeveloped. Theoretically, Fu Yahui discussed essentialism and anti-essentialism in library science, noting phenomenology's emphasis on the meaning of things and facts [13]. Li Hongxia proposed that constructive postmodern phenomenology could deepen library theory and practice [14]. Only one empirical study was found: Chen Guangwei used phenomenological interviews to understand the adaptation experiences of four new university library directors, identifying five themes including preparation, work strategies, relationship building, challenges, and recommendations [15].

Phenomenological Method Application Papers in Chinese Library Science

First Author	Year	Title	Journal
(Philosophical discussions)			Various
Chen Guangwei	2017	Phenomenological Study of New University Library Directors' Adaptation	<i>University Library Work</i>

2.2 Practical Application Cases

International applications are more extensive and in-depth, covering:

2.2.1 Phenomenology in User Information Literacy

Information literacy has been central to library research since 1973, particularly with the internet's proliferation. J. Cope et al. used open-ended interviews to explore faculty perceptions of information literacy, revealing contextual, textual, and experiential themes [17]. J.M. Budd applied phenomenology to ACRL information literacy standards, developing an alternative "phenomenological cognitive-behavioral" framework that identified elements absent from official standards [18].

2.2.2 Library Staff's Professional Experiences

While literature offers skill development advice, phenomenology explores career transitions' lived experiences. R.L. Fought et al. examined health sciences library directors' leadership effectiveness, identifying environmental assessment, strategic decision-making, and critical skills as key themes [21].

2.2.3 Knowledge Management and Creation

Knowledge processes intertwine with information behavior. A.R. Suorsa studied Finland's "Reading for Joy" program using hermeneutic phenomenology and Gadamer's play ontology to explore knowledge creation interactions [22]. R.T. O'Farrill examined workplace information literacy's relationship to knowledge management in NHS Scotland [23].

2.2.4 Human-Technology Interaction

Phenomenology illuminates how users perceive technology. The U.S. Library of Congress's NDLP study combined social construction of technology (SCOT) with phenomenological narrative to analyze developers' experiences, revealing innovation patterns [19][20]. M. Howard et al. used Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to describe smartphone use habits, informing mobile library services [24]. A. Harrison et al. analyzed social media posts from six university libraries, identifying ten fundamental elements for social media marketing strategies [25].

2.2.5 Other Areas

Additional topics include librarians' emotional labor [30], collection development experiences [27], medical students' library use in problem-based learning [28], and public libraries' connections with socioeconomically disadvantaged populations [29].

2.3 Application Scope

Phenomenology complements quantitative research by addressing meaning, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings that data alone cannot capture. It emphasizes participants' perspectives, allowing researchers to investigate, clarify, and generate new questions based on emerging insights. The method is particularly suited for: (1) multiple realities in information services, (2) sensory experiences in user studies, and (3) situational descriptions of library practices. It values subjectivity, description, and interpretation, recognizing that perspectives vary across time and individuals [31].

3 Application Strategies for Phenomenological Methods in Libraries

3.1 Application Modes

Common data collection approaches include:

3.1.1 Participatory Interviews

Researchers engage directly with participants' experiences. Unlike standard interviews, phenomenological interviews focus on original, situated experiences. A 3-7 minute psychological warm-up precedes questions with narrative coherence, progressively moving from event recall to experiential depth. J. Cope's faculty information literacy study used layered questioning about standards and disciplinary influences [17]. O. Shachaf et al. conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 Israeli reference librarians about information overload [33].

3.1.2 Textual Writing (Diaries, Field Notes)

Participants write phenomenological reflections on library experiences. This approach emphasizes emotional language and reflective space. H. Julien et al. asked Canadian academic and public librarians to maintain diaries for three months, submitting weekly teaching reflections electronically to facilitate continuous introspection [30].

3.1.3 Other Methods

Participatory observation, focus groups, and narrative storytelling are also used. A. Suorsa et al. combined semi-structured interviews with video recordings to study collaborative knowledge creation in Finland's "Joy of Reading" program [34]. Data are typically recorded through audio, video, or text and analyzed using NVivo, Dedoose, or open coding.

3.2 Application Procedures

Drawing on Husserl, van Manen, and existing library studies, the phenomenological research process comprises five stages [Figure 3: see original paper]: (1) collecting experiential data, (2) reading descriptions closely, (3) extracting essential elements, (4) identifying unique components, and (5) distilling core themes. Key considerations include:

- **Epoché (Bracketing):** Suspending personal biases, theories, and knowledge to focus on the phenomenon itself and participants' authentic understanding.
- **Intentionality:** Maintaining openness to unexpected ideas while excluding empirical assumptions about external existence.
- **Intersubjectivity:** Emphasizing relationships in micro-level interactions, reconciling differences through dialogue to achieve shared understanding [35].

3.3 Difficulties and Challenges

Phenomenological research presents several challenges: (1) it is time-intensive, requiring extensive effort in observation, interviews, and text analysis; (2) it demands capable, willing participants who can articulate experiences, with researcher-participant co-interest essential; (3) findings are not final conclusions—human agency makes exhaustive essence-capture impossible, and some library science questions may require complementary quantitative methods.

3.4 Strategic Recommendations

(1) Introduce International Experience and Promote Local Application

Chinese scholars should actively explore how phenomenological methods can be adapted to domestic library contexts, examining question formulation, data collection, documentation, and analysis in relation to local practices.

(2) Overcome Implementation Difficulties to Reveal Micro-level Essences

Phenomenology discovers meaning through direct examination of experiences, feelings, and expressions. Researchers need clear perspectives, deep understanding of participants' lifeworlds, and rigorous textual analysis to identify key issues from described situations.

(3) Combine Methods Appropriately

Phenomenology alone may be insufficient for complex problems. P. Ngulube's analysis of 303 knowledge management articles (2009-2013) revealed diverse qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods—including case studies, historical research, ethnography, content analysis, and phenomenology—each contributing different knowledge types to the research process [36].

Phenomenology's emphasis on freeing inquiry from traditional concepts, theories, and prejudices makes it a powerful tool for exploring library work. Beyond information literacy, practice, and knowledge management, it can inform reading promotion, open access, information retrieval, and think tank development. Further research is needed to integrate theory and practice, maintain fidelity to lived experience, and enrich library science's methodological repertoire.

References

- [1] Ni Liangkang. The Basic Significance of the Phenomenological Movement—Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Phenomenological Movement [J]. *Social Sciences in China*, 2000(4): 69-78.
- [2] Ye Xiaoling, Li Yi. “Method” or “Methodology”?—Clarifying the Relationship Between Phenomenology and Qualitative Research [J]. *Educational Research and Experiment*, 2018(4): 15-22.
- [3] Wang Ping. Educational Phenomenological Methods and Their Application

- [D]. Kaifeng: Henan University, 2010.
- [4] Xu Huifu. Phenomenological Research Methods and Procedures [M]. Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 2008.
- [5] Moustakas C. *Phenomenological Research Methods* [M]. London: SAGE Publications, 1994.
- [6] Creswell JW, Poth J. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th Edition [M]. London: SAGE Publications, 2018.
- [7] Pan Wei. A Comparative Study of Grounded Theory and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [J]. *Journal of Xihua University (Philosophy & Social Sciences)*, 2010, 29(3): 112-116.
- [8] Gui Luomin. University Libraries Through Freshmen's Eyes—User Needs Research Based on Ethnographic Methods [J]. *Library Development*, 2015(11): 42-46.
- [9] Lu Zhenbo, Li Xiaodong. Application of Ethnographic Methods in Library and Information Science Research [J]. *Information and Documentation Services*, 2014(3): 13-17.
- [10] Wang Yanbing, Zheng Fei. Application of Ethnographic Methods in Library and Information Science [J]. *Library Theory and Practice*, 2016(3): 29-33.
- [11] Budd J. Phenomenology and Information Studies [J]. *Journal of Documentation*, 2015, 61(1): 44-59.
- [12] Itoga M. Meaning and Understanding in Human Information Uses: A Critical Study of Information Needs Based on the Sense-Making Concept [J]. *Library & Information Science*, 1991(29): 1-19.
- [13] Fu Yahui. Essentialism and Anti-essentialism in Library Science Research [J]. *Library Theory and Practice*, 2017(5): 1-10.
- [14] Li Hongxia. Constructive Postmodern “Reconstruction” Thought: Interpretation of Postmodern Library Science Methodology [J]. *Library Work and Study*, 2017, 1(3): 10-15.
- [15] Chen Guangwei. A Phenomenological Study of New University Library Directors' Adaptation Experiences [J]. *University Library Work*, 2017, 37(5): 35-39.
- [16] Rader HB. Information Literacy 1973-2002: A Selected Literature Review [J]. *Library Trends*, 2002, 51(2): 82-88.
- [17] Cope J, Sanabria JE. Do We Speak the Same Language? A Study of Faculty Perceptions of Information Literacy [J]. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 2014, 14(4): 475-501.
- [18] Budd JM. Cognitive Growth, Instruction, and Student Success [J]. *College & Research Libraries*, 2008, 69(4): 319-331.
- [19] Dalbello M. A Phenomenological Study of an Emergent National Digital Library, Part I: Theory and Methodological Framework [J]. *Library Quarterly*, 2005, 75(4): 391-420.
- [20] Dalbello M. A Phenomenological Study of an Emergent National Digital Library, Part II: The Narratives of Development [J]. *Library Quarterly*, 2005, 75(4): e28-e70.
- [21] Fought RL, Misawa M. Accepting the Challenge: What Academic Health Sciences Library Directors Do to Become Effective Leaders [J]. *Journal of the*

- Medical Library Association*, 2018, 106(2): 219-226.
- [22] Suorsa AR. Knowledge Creation and Play: A Phenomenological Approach [J]. *Journal of Documentation*, 2015, 71(3): 503-525.
- [23] O’Farrill RT. Information Literacy and Knowledge Management at Work [J]. *Journal of Documentation*, 2010, 66(5): 706-733.
- [24] Howard M, Bussell H. Habituating: A Merleau-Pontian Analysis of the Smartphone [J]. *Library Trends*, 2018, 66(3): 267-288.
- [25] Harrison A, Burrell R, Velasquez S, et al. Social Media Use in Academic Libraries: A Phenomenological Study [J]. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 2017, 43(3): 248-256.
- [26] Gallin PA. The Joy of Combining Librarianship and Motherhood [J]. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 2015, 41(6): 839-847.
- [27] Papadakos J, Trang A, Wiljer D, et al. What Criteria Do Consumer Health Librarians Use to Develop Library Collections? A Phenomenological Study [J]. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 2014, 102(2): 78-84.
- [28] Chen KN, Huang IT. Library Use by Medical Students Engaging in Problem-Based Learning: A “Taiwanese” Case Study [J]. *Libri*, 2012, 62(3): 248-258.
- [29] Smeaton K, Bruce C, Hughes H, et al. The Online Life of Individuals Experiencing Socioeconomic Disadvantage: How Do They Experience Information? [J]. *Information Research*, 2017, 22(33).
- [30] Julien H, Genuis SK. Emotional Labour in Librarians’ Instructional Work [J]. *Journal of Documentation*, 2009, 65(6): 926-937.
- [31] Denscombe M. *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, 3rd Edition [M]. Translated by Tao Baoping. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 2011.
- [32] Wilson TD. Philosophical Foundations and Research Relevance: Issues for Information Research [J]. *Journal of Information Science*, 2004, 29(2): 445-452.
- [33] Shachaf O, Aharony N, Baruchson S. The Effects of Information Overload on Reference Librarians [J]. *Library & Information Science Research*, 2016, 38(4): 301-307.
- [34] Suorsa A, Huotari ML. Knowledge Creation in Interactive Events: A Pilot Study in the Joy of Reading Programme [J]. *Information Research*, 2014, 19(4): 16-28.
- [35] Husserl. *The Idea of Phenomenology* [M]. Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2007.
- [36] Ngulube P. Trends in Research Methodological Procedures Used in Knowledge Management Studies [J]. *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science*, 2015, 25(2): 125-143.

Author Contributions

Zheng Fei: Research framework design and content guidance.

Li Xiaoyan: Research framework design and manuscript revision.

Li Xinxin: Data collection, research design, and manuscript drafting.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.