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How Close Is Close Enough?: Reflections on the Experience of Doing Phenomenology

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MEET THE AUTHOR

After making 12 moves in less than 15 years, **Margot Eyring** settled in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1973. Her home was an open one in which political refugees, foreign exchange students, foster brothers and sisters, traveling ministers, friends, and her father's patients were always welcome. Her exposure to so many diverse people and locations cultivated an interest in cross-cultural issues. She is particularly interested in promoting the well-being of those called to work in cross-cultural contexts. After receiving her doctorate in education from the University of Tennessee in 1992, she moved to Irian Jaya, Indonesia. There she worked as a guidance counselor and teacher at an international high school developed primarily for the children of expatriate missionaries. This cross-cultural experience provided her with opportunities to explore and implement strategies for promoting well-being with those working in an international setting. Eyring currently lives in Washington, DC, and helps individuals engaged in cross-cultural work to be whole and healthy in the midst of stressful situations in cultures different from their own.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

In this chapter, Margot Eyring shares her experiences of conducting phenomenological interviews, an approach that encourages careful description of experiences and often disclosure of sensitive topics by the co-participants. She describes doing research with her own students and the subsequent difficulties in understanding role changes and boundaries. She discusses dealing with multiple, and sometimes blurred, roles in her research projects. As you read this chapter, consider the following questions:

1. Eyring describes her journey into qualitative research, in particular a phenomenological approach to research. How do her experiences compare to yours?
2. The process of phenomenological interviews brought about increased knowledge and awareness of her students, and also an awareness that information disclosed in the interview setting may or may not be the same information that is learned through the role of teacher, mentor, or advisor in other settings. Can information learned through other sources and in other contexts be used as research data in the cases she described?
3. Eyring describes the potential for learning dangerous information from students in the context of the confidential phenomenological interview. How might this type of information be handled given the various roles other than researcher that she held with her students?

Although complicated by multiple perspectives, multiple roles, and multiple dilemmas, my experience with qualitative research has been singularly satisfying. As the result of the multiple aspects inherent in the phenomenological research approach used in the two projects discussed in this chapter, I have faced ethical dilemmas and difficult choices. In one study, I investigated well-being in college students, in the other I looked at anger in young high school women. In both studies, my involvement in the project grew out of a marriage between a personal interest in the topic, my experiences with the students/co-participants, and a phenomenological perspective. The process of working through the dilemmas and choices has helped me to refine my understanding of my role as researcher. These dilemmas have also sensitized me on a personal level to the issues surrounding interpersonal boundaries.

I will begin by discussing my phenomenological approach to establish a context for the issues I want to address. I will use my study of well-being to introduce this perspective and then weave in stories from the study of young women's anger. My interest in well-being began after having a debilitating illness after living a life with few physical problems. Developing a case of mononucleosis motivated me to become more actively involved in promoting my own well-being. This interest in well-being expanded and spilled over into my choice of graduate programs and then research interests. My introduction to phenomenology as a method of qualitative research provided a vehicle for me to pursue the topic of well-being in a personally relevant way.

A phenomenological approach is one characterized by multiple perspectives. Instead of the researcher choosing one angle of vision from which to view a phenomenon, there is an attempt to understand experience through the lenses of those describing the experience—while recognizing one's own perspective and the influence of that perspective. Because experience is complex, the researcher must fluidly shift his or her focus from the experience itself, to the ground shaping the experience, and then back to the experience. As phenomena are viewed from these many different angles, a richer picture is seen.

Phenomenology is both a way of seeing and an attitude that suggests appropriate methods for investigating what is seen (Bogdon & Taylor, 1975; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Valle & King, 1978). This attitude involves a stance or posture of openness to "the whole field of possible experiential phenomena" (Ihde, 1986). Through the phenomenological attitude or perspective, there is an attempt to see experience in new ways. This openness and looking for possibilities involves a search for new depth or richness in understanding human experience.

The phenomenological research method described by Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) requires the researcher to become more attentive to aspects of experience that have been previously unattended to, by consciously focusing on them. Sometimes the experiences being studied have been consciously present for the individual, sometimes they have been unreflected experiences. In either situation, reflection promotes insight. Keen (1975) suggested that "we are all native phenomenologists; we all have experiences, reflect upon them, and interpret them, and in doing so we live our lives more or less successfully" (p. iii). The phenomenological researcher seeks to enhance this process of reflection and interpretation so experience can be understood more richly. Understanding brings clarity, and also an awareness of the complexity of experience. It seems fitting that a phenomenological study would provide a context for multiple dilemmas.

The context of the phenomenological interview must be characterized by trust, openness, and respect for the co-participant. In a successful interview, the researcher listens and follows the story of the other, and significant life experiences are reflected on and explored. A relationship of mutual trust develops as co-participants respond to the trust and respect being offered to them by the researcher. By choosing to share their stories, the co-participants make themselves vulnerable. For instance, the issue of well-being touches the core of what it means to live life.

When people talk about their own times of well-being, they connect to experiences that have been significant to their sense of themselves, the things they do, and the relationships they have with others. This type of dialogic interaction facilitates significant self-disclosure and self-discovery. Shared understanding of personal experiences encourages a relational connection between the co-participant and the interviewer. There is reciprocity (Deyhle, Hess, & LeCompte, 1992) in that both participants benefit from the exchange through an increased understanding of the phenomenon and from the shared experience of dialogic interaction. I have experienced the evidence of deepened relationships and increased insight in subsequent interactions with co-participants when they relate to me in more intimate or trusted ways about issues of importance to them.

The two necessary characteristics for participants in this type of study are that they have had the experience being studied and that they are willing to discuss that experience. Because talking is the medium for the dialogue, it is helpful to interview individuals who will not be intimidated by the process of using words to describe their own experiences. Identifying people who are willing and able to communicate will facilitate the process of understanding the nuances of the experience being studied. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) also recommended "depend[ing] on conventions of pragmatically and theoretically informed selection rather than probabilistic sampling" (p. 8), to recruit the co-participants for this study. This means identifying people who are accessible and willing, and for whom there is a rationale.

In my case, I knew I wanted to study the experience of well-being for college students. The students who seemed most intriguing to me were the students with whom I worked. I had access to them, and as participants in a freshman mentoring program, they had identified themselves as having successfully managed their own college careers. They had a positive orientation toward helping others and appeared to be able to work well with others. All had been recommended by a university official who thought that they stood out among their fellow students as excellent

candidates. Each student had been through an interview process in which he or she was selected to participate in the mentoring program. I interviewed 12 students for the study.

My second project involved interviews about anger with high school women at a small international high school in Southeast Asia. My entrance into the anger study took a rather circuitous route. In the high school psychology class I was teaching, I required that each student develop a research project. One of the young women, with the pseudonym Tigerlily, chose to research the topic of women and anger. She was interested in using a qualitative interview to obtain her data. As I worked with her on her project, I became increasingly interested in her anger experiences and of those of the other young women at the school where I worked. Because I had previously participated in a research group involved in an anger study, I was able to recommend the group's interview schedule for Tigerlily's study. When I conducted the bracketing interview with her, I was captured by the idea of interviewing these students.

My motivation in both of these studies was primarily to study the human experiences of well-being and young women's anger. I also recognized the research process as a vehicle for promoting relationships with my students. I believe the context of a positive relationship can positively influence learning. Because Patton (1980) suggested that it is important to get close to participants so they can experience a sense of trust and be able to share freely, I saw current relationships as facilitating the research process. I also saw the potential for future relational benefits coming from the research process. Developing a relationship could enhance the research process, and in turn the research interview could influence the relationship. I was interested in the benefits of both possibilities.

The challenges I experienced are all connected to the issue of boundaries. Cloud and Townsend (1992) use the metaphor of personal property lines to describe boundaries. These property lines "help us to distinguish what is our responsibility and what isn't" (p. 25). Although many qualitative researchers experience dilemmas involving their relationships in their projects, I believe the multiple roles that have accompanied my choice of co-participants has accelerated the development of boundary dilemmas. These dilemmas develop around relationships, knowledge, and expectations.

In the well-being project, my roles included teacher-supervisor, mentor, and researcher. In the context of the anger project, my roles were even more numerous. The international school where I worked is situated in a small town with approximately 200–250 expatriates. The foreigners in the community often work and socialize with each other. For some of these students, I was some combination of teacher, class sponsor, family friend, personal friend, mentor, and supervisor. In both studies, my multiple roles both enhanced my research experience and presented me with problems.

One of my first dilemmas related to the interaction between knowledge and relationship. Without exception, the interview context created a space for the students to share significant life experiences. I immediately felt closer to my co-participants. I had a sense of knowing them better and liking them more. The students' behaviors seemed to indicate a similar experience. After our interviews, in other contexts such as the classroom, the student union, or at an extracurricular event, students would surprise me by speaking to me about issues they had mentioned in the interviews.

Sometimes the references included insider jokes or allusions to incidents I was not sure others in the room or vicinity understood. For example, one student had described a very disappointing and traumatic experience during an interview. During a time when we were with others, this co-participant made reference to the feelings of loss and disappointment that had been described during the interview. In this instance and others, I faced a dilemma in knowing how to respond. My tension grew out of a commitment to protect and maintain this person's confidentiality as a participant in a research project, while also affirming the relationship that had developed as a result of our interactions.

As a policy, I do not acknowledge publicly that I have interviewed anyone. But, when co-participants assume that my knowledge of certain information about them means I will freely respond to them about that knowledge in public, I have had to adjust my responses. Instead of maintaining an air of ignorance, I have chosen to affirm their trust and respond in a way that shows the value of our relationship. I believe that in this way I demonstrate respect for their judgment and their willingness to converse about topics important to them. Knowing when to know and when not to know has required that I work on my sensitivity to social cues and norms for communication in situations involving multiple roles.

Situations in which I have multiple roles also make it difficult for me to keep a clear distinction in my mind about the difference between common knowledge and insider knowledge that has been learned in the interview context. I have found it hard to keep track of where I learned specific information. It has also taken a conscious effort to know how to respond appropriately to my co-participants in the different contexts and roles in which I relate to them. As a researcher, I am committed to confidentiality. The relationships I have developed with some of my co-participants have helped them to trust me and enabled them to share information that I would describe as intimate and personal. I want to make sure I respect that trust and honor their stories. But, because of my many roles and opportunities to interact with the co-participants, I have also learned similar information in other situations.

For example, the courses in which I have taught co-participants have involved self-reflection and personal development assignments. I have also been involved in student development programs and other extracurricular activities. Although public knowledge is associated with more flexibility and freedom, I find that my role as researcher has influenced me in my other roles to be more aware of boundaries and more sensitive about addressing personal issues in potentially public places. I always try to take the lead from the other in determining how informed to be when I interact with students/co-participants.

Other dilemmas in which boundaries are blurred by multiple roles are illustrated in the following examples. One of the co-participants in the anger study is the daughter of a friend. Before I even conceived of participating in this project, I learned information about a traumatic experience in that student's past from my friend, in the context of our friendship. When the student described her incidents of anger, she alluded to the experience, but didn't describe it in specific terms. Having knowledge about her past created the dilemma of wanting more specific descriptions of her experience and knowing that there was more to her story than she was choosing to share.

My tension involved wanting to respect her boundaries and wanting more information about the experience. I also felt constrained by the potential discomfort she might feel about talking about the incident. (Another wrinkle to this situation is that if I hadn't been given knowledge of her past, I might have felt a greater sense of freedom to ask additional questions.) In any situation, it is the co-participant's choice to describe any situation in her own terms. In this particular incident, either this co-participant didn't make specific connections between her experience and her anger description, or she wasn't comfortable discussing the experience at that time. In either case, I was uncomfortable using probes that weren't general and open-ended. As a researcher, I have to accept and value the information that is revealed as being the information the co-participant finds important to communicate.

In another interview, a student alluded to an anger experience that I already had heard about in the school context. Because I had heard vivid accounts from several others about the episode, I had to consciously remember to ask her to be more specific about her experience of the incident. In alluding to the situation, she made statements like "you know" and "remember when." Because I did know some things and I wanted her to feel that I was hearing and understanding her story, I didn't want to ask questions from a totally naive perspective. But, I also didn't want to assume that my knowledge of the incident was the same as her experience, even though her language suggested to me that she made that assumption.

A personally difficult issue I faced with this student had to do with my expectations for our interactions as student and teacher. The relationship we had developed through this student's work on her research project and in the school context spilled over into the interview in a positive way. In the interview, she spoke to me about her anger experiences in concrete, descriptive terms that she had never previously used with me. The interview situation seemed to create a safe place for intimate conversation. After the interview, she returned to her previously more distant style. The interview had raised my expectations for the type of interaction she was capable of, yet when she chose to communicate in her distant way, I had to respect her boundaries—even though I was disappointed about the loss of intimacy.

Another dilemma relates to the complications that multiple roles create for dangerous information. For example, in one of my well-being interviews, one co-participant described a vivid account of well-being in which he experienced an altered state of consciousness. The images that he painted were extremely colorful and clear. The language sounded similar to that used by individuals describing drug experiences. I wanted to know if he were describing a drug-induced well-being experience or if it were possible to have this type of well-being without drugs. It seemed important for me to be able to clearly describe how this experience was similar or different to other times of well-being.

At the same time, I was a representative of a university that has strict regulations against drug use. I knew that discovering this student used drugs could potentially influence my interactions with him at a later date in other contexts. Also, because members of my research group were also campus officials, the co-participant could be easily traced by someone intent on doing so—even though strict confidentiality protocol was being followed. In this situation, I decided to press on to find out the information in a way that would ensure the confidentiality of his information—at the expense of having the information on the transcript.

Since his description of this incident occurred at the end of the interview, I waited until we had turned off the tape before asking him if the incident of well-being had been drug induced. I determined to take field notes to document his response. I felt less obligated to share those notes verbatim than I would a part of the transcript. Having the information would enable me to comment on and interpret his experience in light of the information given. During a group analysis of the transcript, someone commented that his description sounded like a drug experience. I was able to say that the student had denied using drugs and that he likened the experience to a religious one.

A boundary issue heightened by the students' multiple roles relates to the tension between being true to people's stories and at the same time insuring them anonymity. In my well-being project, many of the students had stories that were identifiable—even in a school of more than 20,000 students. For example, one student had lost a position in a student election and another had won a prize in a state beauty contest. Both events had been significant incidents in the students' well-being experiences. When I had to make choices about which stories to use to illustrate the themes of well-being, I was faced with the dilemma of telling their stories and trying to keep their identities anonymous.

In each case, the campus-wide exposure of the events meant that telling the stories could identify the students as co-participants. In the end, I chose to include aspects of the stories because they had both been so significant to the integrity of the co-participants' well-being experience. I chose quotes that illustrated the themes of well-being, while being as discrete as possible about the students' identities. I decided that because the students had known about my intention to publish the results of my study and they still had chosen to tell these particular stories, I could share those stories in a careful way.

Although all researchers should always present their co-participants' stories in ways that respect those individuals, that don't take advantage of the relationship between researcher and co-participant, and yet are research efforts characterized by integrity, these guidelines are even more important when co-participants have multiple relationships with the researcher. Multiple roles in relationships increase the opportunity both for multiple positive *and* negative ramifications from research decisions. In one or two situations in these studies, I had to be particularly conscious of the words I chose to communicate an incident so that the outward appearances of the story didn't compromise my understanding of the individual's meaning of the event. Careless or inappropriate representation of my co-participants could have been very hurtful to them and to the trust relationship we had developed.

The research interviews both enhanced relationships and were facilitated by having previous connections with the students, but the enhanced relationships also had some negative effects. With two co-participants, the issue of multiple roles facilitated differing expectations about the relationship between the research project and the student's classroom performance. These students viewed their participation in the research project as extra credit that could make up for a slightly lower level of performance in class activities. I do not believe that I ever communicated this message. I also made a conscious attempt to hold the students who had participated in the study to the same standards and expectations that I had for all students in my classes. But, when these two students' grades turned out to be lower than expected, one got very angry and said many unpleasant things about me. Other students who had participated in the project communicated this student's dissatisfaction to me. When I tried to make contact to discuss the matter, she wouldn't return my calls.

My interpretation of this situation is that the increased closeness in our relationship, which developed as a result of the research process, may have changed the students' perceptions about my role. I believe she focused on me as a mentor-friend and forgot my responsibility to give her a fair evaluation in her coursework in my role as teacher. This situation motivated me to be more clear about stating at the beginning of my next set of interviews that the interview would not be connected to our classroom experience or to the student's performance in the classroom.

Another issue regarding expectations occurred frequently in the interviews from both studies. Often co-participants would respond to my research question with a request to define for them what I wanted them to talk about. I think their desire to give me what I wanted was increased by the multiple relationships that wove us together. I had to be very careful to repeatedly communicate the idea that what they wanted to tell me is what I wanted to hear. In the situations where I had information from other sources about their experiences, it was very difficult to achieve a balance between creating a space for them to talk about an issue, and not pursuing something that someone else had indicated was important, even though the co-participant wasn't bringing it up.

The issues of boundaries, information, and relationship became intertwined in several interviews in another way. Several co-participants talked about issues in which I felt they could benefit from interacting with a counselor, pastor, or therapist. For instance, in one case I was concerned about the possibility of an eating disorder, yet the student did not perceive her experience as a problem. As a researcher, I don't feel my role is to recommend therapy—unless I am concerned about a potentially very serious situation. I make efforts to be very circumspect in this type of situation because I have a strong desire to keep the interview content in the interview context—unless the individual brings the information into the realm of public knowledge.

To address the conflict this type of situation prompts in me, I have worked on my open-ended questioning skill. I find that if I am uncomfortable bringing up an issue with a co-participant or former co-participant, I can often ask a general open-ended question about the topic that allows the individual to deal with the issue if he or she is open to it. If co-participants aren't open to that possibility, my sense of responsibility is reduced because I am able to give them a nonthreatening opportunity to address the issue.

However, there is another side to this sense of responsibility. In both of these studies, I have had multiple roles in multiple contexts. I have had to deal with the fact that the insights gained through my role as researcher transferred over to my roles as mentor, teacher, or friend. Although I didn't often directly address information gained from the interview in outside contexts, I found myself more sensitive to opportunities to discuss issues that emerged outside the research context because I had insider information. This information frequently supported my perceptions (as a teacher, mentor, or friend) of the students' life situations. In instances such as this, I was able to be more assertive about discussing an issue (for example, encouraging the option of talking to a helping professional) because I had the individual's personal story to support my intuitive response about the importance of the issue in the individual's life.

Another twist to this theme of helping occurred in several interviews when a co-participant described a situation and then asked me, "How can I get over that? Do you have any answers?" or "What do you think?" In these situations, I was faced with the dilemma of how to stay connected (obviously the co-participants felt comfortable with the interview and the relationship we were developing) and at the same time, how to maintain my role as the researcher. In one case I replied that I would be happy to talk about the issue later, and then the interview continued.

The interview context is not usually an appropriate context for helping and problem solving, unless the helping is the natural result of the co-participant's reflection and communication of those reflections. The interview process itself is often therapeutic because it provides the co-participant with the opportunity to talk about personally relevant issues to someone who provides undivided attention. The dialogue of the interview often creates a climate that facilitates a person being helped.

In summary, I have learned that researching in one's backyard does indeed have benefits (and dilemmas). The dilemmas are ones that will likely face any researcher who spends much time at all getting to know a particular research context. When the researcher has multiple roles in the context, the dilemmas emerge more quickly and perhaps with more complexity. In my experience, I believe that my co-participants' transparency and willingness to participate fully in my study far outweighed the negative situations that resulted from my multiple roles. In situations where my relationships have extended over a relatively long period of time after the interviews, the research role lost much of its power as an influencing factor as additional experiences transformed those relationships. Dealing with these dilemmas has taught me to be more careful about delineating my research role and the benefits (or lack of them) that my study may have for the co-participants. I have also developed my sensitivity to personal boundaries and my open-ended questioning skills. Multiple dilemmas can be addressed and overcome.

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Teacher-Researcher: A Long and Winding Road From the Public School to the University

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