



Practitioner Lived Experience of Complex Stakeholder Management in Festivals and Events A Phenomenological Approach

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Keywords

Hermeneutic phenomenology, event management, stakeholder management, reflexivity

Abstract

The experiential nature of events is considered a central and foremost feature of event management (Getz, 2008). To address this requirement there have been calls for phenomenological approaches including hermeneutics to be embraced by the event research community (Crowther et al., 2015; Getz, 2007). However, such approaches are seen to be problematic as there is no established knowledge and tradition of phenomenology in the field of event management (Ziakas & Boukas, 2014). Indeed, analysis of event management literature has shown that qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups accounted for only 34% of publications (Crowther et al., 2015) and a mere 0.7% used phenomenology (Draper et al., 2018), and it has been considered essential to develop a phenomenological research agenda in

event management to increase the research paradigms traditionally applied to the field (Ziakas & Boukas, 2014).

It has been acknowledged that event stakeholder management is complex (Michopoulou et al., 2023) with varying stakeholder timelines (Crowther et al., 2015) and a lack of suitable stakeholder mapping and management models (Davis, 2017; Pernecky, 2023). Yet despite this, it is recognized that such complexities, timeline challenges and management limitations are being overcome. This indicates that collective tacit knowledge has been developed through lived experience within the event practitioner body (Wallace & Michopoulou, 2023). This in turn suggests an epistemology of practice from tacit or group knowledge (Cook & Brown, 1999) rooted in the lived experience of practitioners and a phenomenology of practice (van Manen, 2007). This extended abstract addresses the use of phenomenological research and develops an approach to explore event practitioner experience of the phenomenon of stakeholder management in festivals and events using phenomenological principles.

Methodology in phenomenological research is contentious. None of the early phenomenological philosophers developed any rules, methods or systems for their methodological procedures (Dowling, 2007; Nelms, 2015). Subsequently, phenomenological methods have been developed formulated through interpretation of the original philosophy and application of its core principles. There are, however, some distinct schools of thought, notably the eidetic or descriptive phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the hermeneutic or interpretive approach of Martin Heidegger and their significantly different attitudes towards the concept of 'bracketing'.

For Husserl's (1992) eidetics, scientific rigour could only be achieved through objective views formed by opinions of the experience rather than subjective (McCarthy, 2015). Phenomena must be stripped of all cultural, societal influences, historical time and place and the researcher set aside all previous knowledge to prevent prejudice of the objective description (Nelms, 2015; Pernecky, 2016). Meanwhile Heidegger's (2001) hermeneutics accepts inherent subjectivity and takes an interpretive approach to participant narratives believing it is impossible to approach a subject in a blank way with a mind bracketed and emptied of preconceptions (Nelms, 2015), with social, cultural and historical understanding (also termed 'situatedness') deemed fundamental to the researcher. In the context of fields such as management studies, it is noted that bracketing historical and cultural influences is challenging when, for example, the concept of a manager has developed considerably in relation to radical changes in business culture and practice over the decades (McCarthy, 2015). It follows that for event management research bracketing is not considered suitable leading to a research philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology.

In terms of method, hermeneutics is considered a fluid set of guiding principles to assist in the search for truth (Regan, 2012) and hermeneutic research 'founded on the ontological view that lived experience is an interpretive process' (Dowling, 2007, p.133). There are a number of hermeneutic principles which provide a phenomenological framework for research. The 3-part present examines the temporal structure of experience and how the situatedness of the past-of-present informs the present-of-present to develop action in the future of present (Cocker, 2015; Gallagher, 2017; Heidegger, 2001; Husserl, 1992).

The hermeneutic circle is the process of understanding and interpretation of a phenomenon where part and whole are related in a circular way – ‘in order to understand the whole, it is necessary to understand the parts, while to understand the parts it is necessary to have some comprehension of the whole’ (Pernecky, 2016, p.20). According to Regan (2012) Gadamer, developed the concept of the ‘fusion of horizons’ as understanding takes place through dialogue with others and a questioning mind. This includes deriving understanding from the personal involvement of the researcher in a reciprocal dialogue and processes of interpretation with the participant (Dowling, 2007) with the researcher’s past experiences and preconceptions crucial to understanding (Urcia, 2021). Finally, there is the phenomenological interview, the established semi structured, qualitative interview tool which is informed by four key phenomenological principles: exploring ‘the thing itself’ through description; searching for ‘invariant structures’ of the experience; maintaining first person perspective, and; acknowledging enaction, embodiment and embeddedness of subjectivity in interview (Høffding et al., 2022).

Analysis in phenomenology presents a challenge as its philosophy does not construct theory leading to a critical distinction between the terms interpretivism and constructivism. For Gadamer, understanding is ‘revealed, reclaimed and uncovered’ through language rather than being ‘created, imagined or invented’ – it is becoming aware of it (Lawn, 2006). An interpretivist is seen to gain knowledge whilst a constructivist constructs knowledge (Pernecky, 2012), therefore a phenomenologist reaches understanding through a focus on description of the things themselves rather than forming knowledge through external explanations (Vagle, 2010). Applying hermeneutics to written descriptions is seen to result in textual plurality and multiplicity ‘which unfold from the participant point of view’

(Steriopoulos et al., 2023). It is also suggested that there is a balance to be struck between finding descriptive meaning and giving interpretative meaning, a dance between eidetic reduction and hermeneutic reflexivity which are intertwined and require improvisation by the phenomenological researcher (Vagle, 2010).

Validity of phenomenological research is dependent on transparency of all steps in the process and reasoning behind methodological choices to allow replicability, a performative consistency of methodological steps and analytical strategy to arrive at potentially reproducible conclusions (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). In the context of phenomenology, consistency is both internal and external: internal concerning the understanding of the interviewee’s descriptions by the interviewer where meaning must follow from content and corroborated through member-checking, and; external concerning comparison of the overall account with established understanding of the phenomena and corroborated through (for example) translation into practice (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). These elements of consistency reflect the means by which criteria for quality research such as sincerity, credibility and resonance can be achieved (Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, validity is deemed to be measured by the quality of engagement with the experience being described and performed by the interviewee – a process termed ‘validity in action’ (Høffding & Martiny, 2016).

The lack of theory in phenomenology also has implications for transferability. Given that researchers cannot make claims for transferability from context A to context B, only claims of transferability can be made by context B subject to suitability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and is dependent on thick description and the situatedness of the initial research. However, Gadamer suggests the notion of applied hermeneutics, believing that hermeneutics has practical dimensions since it can modify attitudes and practices (Lawn, 2006). He also believed there was a combination of commonality of shared enterprise along with an acknowledgement of difference and distinctiveness which he termed 'solidarity' (Lawn, 2006). In the context of the phenomenological research design (figure 1), solidarity amongst event practitioners is seen as a pathway to consensus, a means to fulfil the research aim through hermeneutic application and answer the research question: how do event practitioners address the complex challenges of managing multiple stakeholders in a timely manner whilst also ensuring effective event delivery?

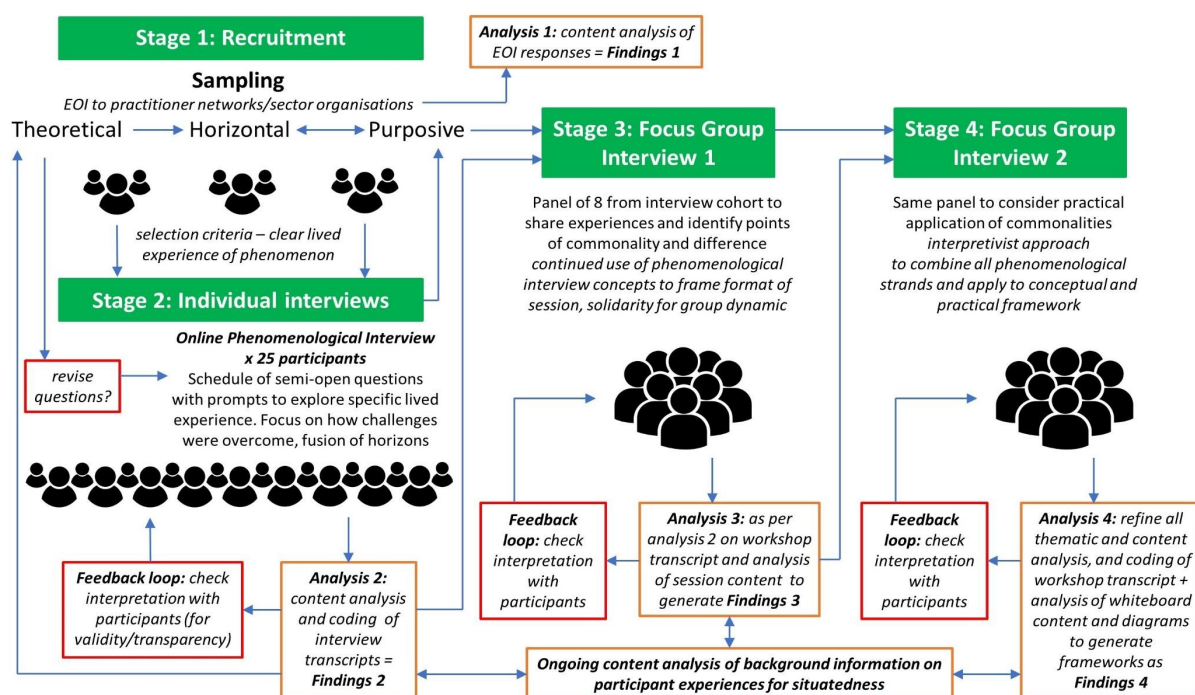


Figure 1. Overview of draft 4-stage research plan

Finally, hermeneutic phenomenology requires reflexivity by the researcher to constantly scrutinise the process and question interpretations through self-analysis, memos and notes. This ensures the participant voice is prioritised whilst the researcher maintains objectivity and their perspective does not compromise the data. For practitioners exploring their lived experience, this reflexivity becomes 'reflective practice' and involves how practitioners think, act, reflect and problem-solve in real-world professional contexts. Much of this understanding is personal knowledge, learned in practice through improvisation and not usually articulated (Gray & Malins, 2004). In the context of the festival and events sector, it is noted there is little research on the experiences of event practitioners or the methods they may use (Brown, 2014). Furthermore, there is a widely acknowledged gap between theory and practice and between relevance and rigour, leading to calls for more collaborative approaches to research that use reflexive understandings (Duxbury et al., 2020) that can improve understanding of experientiality in event management practice. This paper argues that a phenomenological approach can unlock transformational experiences beyond

established borders and boundaries between researchers and practitioners and develop informed and effective stakeholder partnerships for future sustainable festival and events.

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