Critical Reflections On Researching Lived and Learning Experiences: Towards A Critical Phenomenology

Samuel, M.A.[1], Reddy, S.[1], and Brown C.J.W.[2]

1 University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education

2 Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Faculty of Education

Corresponding author: Samuelm@ukzn.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The article presents an analysis of the three authors' critical reflections on their use of traditional canonical research approaches to explore students' lived and learning experiences in the South African higher education context. Author A drew on *lifehistory research* (LHR) to understand how prospective teachers were tackling the increasing diversity in post-apartheid schooling in the 1990s when South Africa achieved its democracy. Author B engaged *phenomenography* to explore the qualitatively different experiences of medical students who were the first cohort to undertake a problem-based learning (PBL) medical curriculum across diverse clinical contexts within a failing healthcare system (in 2010). Author C initially framed his study that focuses on student teachers' lived experiences in diverse teaching practicum (TP) contexts in phenomenology and uses this reflection to argue for a move to critical phenomenology to embrace a more social and political analysis of the participants' lived experiences (2022). Anchored in the critical paradigm, the authors question the relevance of traditional lifehistory research, phenomenography and phenomenology to study lived experiences, especially in contexts where elements of marginalities, complicit oppressions, power negotiations and peripheralisations are at play. The findings reveal that each of the approaches could not be disconnected from a historical socio-political analysis of why inequities persist despite the expressed formal transformational intentions. Lived experiences and the historicised and politicised systemic contexts are intertwined. The article concludes by exploring more relevant and appropriate theoretical frameworks blending interpretivist and critical worldviews. This permeability (whilst resisted by hegemonic guardians of the canon) expands phenomenology traditions to activate prospective research studies in a continuing unequal society.

Keywords: Lifehistory research, phenomenography, critical phenomenology, phenomenological turn

INTRODUCTION: Multiple research traditions of researching lived experience

The interest in celebrating participants' life experiences is not unexpected, especially in contexts where systemic silencing of individuals dominates. Studies of individual experience are often associated with matters of marginality of race, gender, sexual orientation, class and other oppressed categories of individuals at the mercy of oppressive hegemonic forces (Guenther, 2019). This article traces the reflections of three South African researchers who grappled with researching the lived experiences of university students at different points in the evolving post-apartheid context. Each of these perspectives reflects the specific eras when their original research project was conducted: in the early 1990s when redefinitions of a new democratic education system were being forged, in the late 2000s when alternative curriculum approaches in

higher education were being experimented with, and in the early 2020s as continued inequities still confront higher education and professional teacher education. The article highlights the authors' self-reflective re-examination of the dominant research traditions they originally embarked upon. The authors motivate the need to rethink the founding tenets of the research approaches on which they designed their studies. The article shows how researching experience can shift beyond the parochial, nostalgic and circumscribed world of neo-liberalist romanticisation and reductionist accounting of individualistic experiences. The emergence of the hegemonic forces of systemic power influencing students' experiences characterises the authors' preoccupation.

Three traditional research approaches will be explored: *lifehistory research (LHR)*, *phenomenography* and *phenomenology*. Each co-author will outline their lived experiences as researchers represented in first-person reflection. The research process is presented as a dialogue between the researcher/s and the researched, their contexts and their lived worlds (Schulze, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Drawing from their founding interpretivist roots, these three research approaches challenge the traditional empirical perspective, which advocates an objectivist distancing between the researched and the researcher (Holmes, 2020). However, by further elaboration, this article makes a case for a blurring between traditional interpretivist worldviews with a more critical paradigmatic orientation that attends to matters of hierarchy, inequity and power differentials.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES: Troubling the canons.

The article questions how helpful the traditional canonical underpinnings of LHR,

phenomenography and phenomenology are in exploring the lived and learning experiences of students who are located in unjust, inequitable and diverse learning environments. This agenda acknowledges that the traditional approaches had foundational impetus to foreground the nature of the students' lived and their learning experiences. However, the conventional research approaches lacked explanatory power to offer theoretical insight into why these lived and learning experiences occurred the way they did.

The reflective approach described in the findings section below begins with a description of each of the three researchers' foci as they began their research studies. It then proceeds to identify the analysis of the data, which provoked a broader socio-political commentary on the nature of the experiences within the context of an evolving democracy. The authors were concerned that there was a need to attend to matters of social justice, marginality and equity debates to explain the insights into the university students' experiences. Two types of professional education students are described in this data set: student teachers during initial teacher education (Authors A and C) and medical students during professional medical education (Author B). These reflections conclude with an exploration of whether there is a need to shift the traditional canonical underpinnings of the three research traditions to enable the exploration of participants' lived and learning experiences in a continuing unequal society. The sub-sections below is an attempt to represent the researcher interacting not only with the field participants but also with the (evolving) epistemological, ontological and analytical positioning they adopt. The article concludes by looking at cross-fertilising the three co-authors' reflections. This

exploration suggests a way forward towards a prospective *critical phenomenological approach* relevant to tackling power, marginality and disruption.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:
Diverse and convergent lenses

This article draws on the literature from the specific fields of LHR, phenomenography and phenomenology as independent bodies of knowledge. We represent their theoretical framings of this diverse literature in the sub-sections as discreet bodies of insight, revealing the baseline theoretical positionings of the research approaches of the three researchers. The chosen literature for each of the sub-sections is contingent on the time at which the studies were conducted (see introduction above). The methodological field, however, is not static, and our reflection shows how these seminal foundations came to be destabilised as we rethought their value for our localised contexts. This stance invites future scholars not simply to be subservient to the worldview of canonical research traditions but to re-interpret and re-make theoretical worthwhileness based on re-defined researcher purposes.

Each of the fields of research inquiry reflected on has a unique historical trajectory in their emergence into the field of qualitative research approaches. Lifehistory has its origins in an exploration of identity studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). The celebration of life experiences is understood as an emancipatory goal for participants. Phenomenography foregrounded the ways individuals make sense of the world in variant ways with others who share their contextual spaces (Marton, 1986). The goals are to make explicit the process of constructing the quality of the individuals' experience. Phenomenological research proposed a descriptive subjective analysis of

consciousness (Husserl, 1983) which later included interpreting individual experiences through their being and becoming through embodied experiences (Cerbone, 2014). (A critique of these theoretical foundations is presented within each author's reflection below.)

Whilst at a superficial level, the adopted theoretical approaches may appear diverse, they nevertheless share a paradigmatic 'connectivedness' in interpreting the complexity of individual subjective experience. Researchers are invited into that 'internal space' of participants reading the world, and the different traditions represent this unfolding, complex, messy yet kaleidoscopic process (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Additionally, that inner world is populated with the exigencies of the everyday sociological synapses. This article focuses on the intersection between the personal levels of reading the world and the 'outer contexts'.

A further theoretical synergy across all three approaches concerns how power differentials infuse the research spaces we explored. It is not surprising, given the inequities of the past apartheid education, that we interpreted our research studies not just as providing descriptive accounts of the experiences of individuals in the higher education system (Spaull, 2013). We were concerned about how student experiences were circumscribed by their context. We questioned why radical agendas of the campaign for social justice (whilst often professed in rhetorical student politics) have increasingly become co-opted into watered-down versions of themselves, sometimes even looking opposite to what was initially intended (Jansen & Walters, 2022). A critical paradigmatic theoretical interest provoked us to question how higher education has become fetished by

individualism and performativity discourses (Chikoko, 2016). We examined how student experiences have become implicated in personalistic individual private agendas. Perhaps the individualistic personal agendas were undercutting the broader public good of higher education (MacGregor & Makoni, 2010).

It should be noted that the comparative juxtapositioning of the three researchers' methodological approaches is an *ex post facto* form of reflective inquiry. The authors themselves had not adopted a common *a priori* framing chosen before the commencement of their studies. This does not mean that this article is a-theoretical. Instead, the article positions the theoretical lens *a posteriori* (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) primarily since the studies themselves were conducted in differing periods. The research experience is lived, described and subsequently theoretically interpreted in the closing section in a form of practice-led stance that builds theoretical insight from practical research experience (Mariaye & Samuel, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: A comparative reflection

The unfolding data for this article draws from the reflective account of the three authors about the choices made in their research studies. The first approach by Author A explores how *lifehistory research* (LHR) as a theoretical and methodological endeavour expanded across diverse fields of study: commencing with interpreting student teachers' learning experiences of negotiating teacher professional education studies to tackle multicultural schooling in spite of their prior mono-racialised schooling. The LHR tradition, using models developed to understand the constructing of a post-apartheid identity, expanded into health sciences professional education, team and institutional biographies. Personal

and systemic interpretations of experience are explored.

The second *phenomenographical approach* explores the ontological relationship between the participant and the phenomenon in medical education. Author B explores how this lens presented the students' personal ways of experiencing a novel pedagogical phenomenon, namely, problem-based learning (PBL) models in their teaching and learning process of medical higher education. Since the phenomenographic approach yielded inadequate, circumscribed, and reported student variations only on descriptive levels, the author reflects on the option to embrace critical analytical stances as to why the variations were noted. The sociological and politics of knowledge production are highlighted here.

The third approach reflects on the design stages of a present research study grappling with the limits of a traditional *phenomenological approach*. Author C explores how student teachers' lived experiences vary across different contextual spaces during their teaching practicum field experiences. Moreover, the contextual biographical heritages drawn from diverse schooling contexts as learners, challenge these participants to question their crossing-over into alternative schooling spaces. In attempting to understand students moving out-of-their-comfort zones, the data needed a more exhaustive socio-political analysis. This prompted the author to explore the emerging literature on *critical phenomenology* as a potentially disruptive insight into his research study.

DATA FINDINGS: Learning from reflection.

This section outlines the reflections of the three authors on their original research approaches.

1 Life history research: Researching student 'teachers' storied lives (Author A)

What is lifehistory research?

It is often erroneously assumed that lifehistory research (LHR) recounts a celebratory story of individual lives. This has been spurred on by the numerous attempts at vanity biographies that have been constructed (usually by ghostwriters) that tell the intricacies of the stresses and successes of celebrities. It has sensational appeal to those wanting to peep into the lives of people who are notorious, rich or famous. However, as a well-established research approach, lifehistory research attempts to develop a theoretical exploration of a phenomenon, drawing on the life experiences of individuals who provide the material for abstracting thematic analysis of the phenomenon being studied. The interaction with the research participants is not to delve into the intricacies of their storied lives per se. LHR abstracts from the storied lifehistory the epistemological insights into the phenomenon being researched. For example, the storied life history foregrounds individual participants' interaction in a particular place, space, and timespan. This may or may not include significant others to construct the storied life.

Additionally, LHR is not a forensic test of whether the individual has reported a factual truth (a scientific truth) about their lives and the phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). LHR is interested in how individuals choose to tell the story of their lives and the details of the phenomenon being explored. It is thus interested in how individuals experience particular moments and episodes in their lives to feed the *epistemological exploration of the phenomenon*. Convergences and divergences amongst the selected participants assist in deepening the insight into the phenomenon (Dhunpath & Samuel, 2009). This retelling of experiences is reliant on memory recall which is infused not by the events of the past but also by how the individuals in their present circumstances choose to remember the past (an experienced truth). Individuals live in an infinite present which intertwines the past, the present and the future interpretations of the hopes and fears of the participants (Manathunga, et al., 2022).

Developing a theoretical model from lifehistory research

In my own (Author A) research approach, which began in the late 1990s, I chose to foreground the life experiences of student teachers over different periods of their lives (Samuel, 2008). My emphasis was on *how they experienced the learning/teaching of English as a language within their homes, communities, primary and secondary schools, and then within tertiary education as student teachers*. The study extended into analysing experiences of students' undergraduate teacher education experiences and entry into the practicum contexts of deracialising schooling contexts in post-apartheid South Africa. My research findings provoked the construction of a theoretical model depicting the multiple forces influencing teacher identities and their pedagogical decision-making. This model opened up the argument that forces of *biographical* heritage (in specific racial, gendered, classed and geographed areas) drew unique powerful inertial experiences toward which students repeatedly reverted as prospective novice teachers. However, the forces of the *curriculum* programmes they experienced at higher education institutions triggered them into alternative possibilities for being and becoming a teacher. The forces of the school *institutions* into which they were

placed as novice teachers also had a bearing on their evolving interpretations of their experiences.

Similarly, the broad *macro-contextual environmental* shifts occurring within the South African changing political landscape at the time of the turn away from apartheid schooling also infused them with possibilities for alterity. All these forces (*biographical, programmatic, institutional and macro-contextual*) were considered as continuously in dialogue with each other, pushing and pulling student teachers' identities in multiple directions. The study revealed that student identities and learning experiences were thus recurringly being shaped and were shaping ambient forces. This reflected the complexity of identity formation and their experienced worldviews.

New directions for researching experiences using LHR.

Similar studies have since been undertaken (Dhunpath & Samuel, 2009) using the Forcefield Model of Teacher Development to explore the construction of professional education in a range of contexts, for example, in health professional education foregrounding experiences of professionals-in-training or as practising professional therapists dealing with uncertainties in practice (Pillay, 2009; Naidoo, 2019). The approach of theorising experiences includes the study of the evolution of participants' experiences in non-governmental institutions and their mutations in post-apartheid South Africa (Dhunpath, 2009). This collective focus was extended to the study of institutional historical biographies or teacher union structures (Samuel & Mariaye, 2016; Mannah, 2009). Specific, focused biographical cohorts are depicted in more recent studies: for example, the study of music lifehistories of prospective student

teachers in primary schooling (Ralfe, forthcoming). Newer studies have included the exploration of the stakeholders shaping information communication technology policies in education in small island developing states (Ramtohul, forthcoming).

The expanding emphasis of the scope of LHR as a research approach emphasises avoiding reductionist ways of seeing and reading the world. Whilst the original interest of LHR tended to look at individual lives and experiences as the unit of analysis, recent foci have expanded to explore systems, institutions and collective groups of individuals reflecting not unique but intersected forging together of communal, experiential ways of knowing. The emphases have been on exploring the intersecting of competing worldviews and experiences, which always embed elements of power differentials (more of this later). The lifehistory evolution has reflected the adage that the personal is political, connected and interconnected in entangled ways with pluri-versal persons, collectives, times, and places.

2 Phenomenography: Researching medical students' learning experiences (Author B)

A critical reflection on my PhD study

This critical reflection deals with my use of phenomenography to research the learning experiences of the first cohort of medical students who undertook the PBL medical curriculum at a medical school in KwaZulu-Natal (Reddy, 2010). Marton (1986, p. 31), one of the founding fathers, laid the foundation for the epistemological and ontological basis of phenomenography, describing it as:

> *"A research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and*

understand various aspects of the world around them… [P]henomenography investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or think about various phenomena."

Phenomenography is not only concerned with the phenomenon being explored. Neither is it concerned with just the people who are experiencing the phenomenon, but it considers the relation between the two and how people experience or think about phenomena (Reddy, 2010)[1]. In my PhD study (Author B), phenomenography provided a relational method of discovering how the medical students experienced learning the clinical aspects of a PBL medical curriculum and how they subsequently implemented their clinical expertise in the various medical settings within the South African health care system. Phenomenography was used as a methodology to describe and interpret the 'qualitatively different ways' participants experienced the phenomenon. The aim of the PhD study was not simply to capture the full richness of the 'participants' experiences, but it aimed at a specific level of description foregrounding participants' capabilities for experiencing the phenomenon (ways of learning the clinical aspects of a PBL medical curriculum) in qualitatively different ways.

The object of phenomenographic research is variation in ways of experiencing a phenomenon. Pang (2003, p. 146) claims that, "there are two faces of variation". The first face refers to the study of variation between different ways of experiencing the same phenomena, in which categories of description and outcome space are derived to describe how people

experience the reality. The variation that corresponds to the critical aspects of the phenomenon, i.e. the dimensions of variation as experienced by the experiencers, is the second face of variation (Pang, 2003).

The first critical question in the PhD study was concerned with the 'first face of variation': *What were the first cohorts' experiences of learning the clinical aspects of a problem-based learning (PBL) medical curriculum?* The study was conducted when the higher education institution explored alternative professional education methodological approaches. PBL represented a challenge to the traditional Applied Science notions of medical education, where students were exposed first to learning theoretically about the physiological body and then using this knowledge in practical contexts. PBL commences with situated, contextual spaces with defined problem manifestations, and students (as collaborating researchers) activate the search for the requirements for holistic responsiveness when selecting appropriate medical interventions.

The study here was basically descriptive, methodologically oriented, and concerned with the qualitatively different ways participants experienced the phenomenon under investigation. As the researcher, I could sense and understand the variation indicated by the data in this instance. In terms of the 'second face of variation', the emphasis of phenomenography here shifts from methodological to theoretical concerns. The research addressed the 'nature of the different ways of experiencing' based on the following: *How was the relationship between the experiences of learning the*

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[1] Traditional phenomenology is concerned primarily with the nature of the phenomenon itself, and the person who experiences that phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007).

clinical aspects of a PBL medical curriculum and the experiences of the subsequent clinical environments constructed? From the above, it is evident that phenomenography may be used as a methodological approach as well as a theoretical framework. Theoretically, it may be used to explore and describe the individuals' cognitive relationship with the world that they live in (Marton & Booth, 1997). It also concerns itself with the variation of how people experience something.

A critique of phenomenography

My PhD study focused on the range of clinical experiences from the PBL medical curriculum to the actual clinical setting of the South African health system hospitals. The participants were asked to reflect on all the different contexts within which the learning took place. This included their experiences in the Skills laboratory (years 1, 2 and 3), the hospital wards (years 3, 4 and 5), internship (years 6 and 7) and finally community service (year 8). In this way, I expected the participants to express the different ways of experiencing the phenomenon across all the variant clinical contexts. I intended to yield data that reflected and described a variation of the 'ways of experiencing'. In my data collection efforts, I was guided by Marton (1986; 1994) who advised about an open-ended technique with a limited number of questions to evoke the participants' own conceptions. The utterances (as per the interview) were considered as indicative of 'ways of experiencing'. On completion of the phenomenographic analysis, I began questioning the emergent phenomenographic categories that were limited to a superficial descriptive level. I then started a search for an additional analystical approach that would enable me to unpack and illuminate the phenomenographic categories of description

beyond the interpretive phenomenographic level of understanding.

When Ference Marton founded phenomenography in the early 1970s, it did not have a particular overt philosophical basis; neither was it guided by specific theoretical underpinnings (Entwistle, 1997; Giorgi, 1999; Akerlind, 2008). Phenomenography emerged from a strong empirical basis mainly concerned with solving specific learning and teaching problems in higher education (Entwistle, 1997). It later developed from "problem to solution and from question to answer" (Giorgi, 1999, p. 114). Entwistle (1997) succinctly summarises the purpose of the original phenomenographic research:

> *"What eventually became codified as phenomenographic research started out as an attempt to scrutinise and understand human learning by focusing on what people are in fact doing in situated practices and when studying. In particular, the approach was driven by an attempt to replace the abstract and empirically unverifiable conceptual frameworks, such as those which implied that people 'process' or 'store' information in various processing devices of dubious ontological status... The aim was one of reinstating a truly empirical approach to learning as a human and institutional phenomenon, with an interest in clarifying functional relationships between what people do when they engage in learning activities and the nature of understanding they end up with..." (Entwistle, 1997, p.128)*

Phenomenography subsequently became a popular qualitative research tool,

used by researchers who were interested in studying teaching and learning in higher education. With its popularity, came problems and challenges (Entwistle, 1997; Webb, 1997; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Levy & Ben-Ari, 2009). Some phenomenographic studies were critiqued in the early years for not being rigorous enough in their research design and analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative researchers have challenged the phenomenographic approach concerning the subjective nature of deriving the categories of description. This critique, however, may well be pertinent to much qualitative research and is not only peculiar to phenomenography.

Initially, the focus of my study was to understand and describe the qualitatively different ways of experiencing the phenomenon. The phenomenographic approach enabled me to arrive at such categories of description. However, phenomenography alone did not allow me to answer the 'why' research questions of the study. In attempting to uncover *why the participants in my study constructed the relationship between learning the clinical aspects of a PBL medical curriculum and the subsequent clinical environment in the ways that they did*, I needed to unpack the causes of attitudes and behaviours that the emergent categories described. A methodology that would allow me to explain, expose and illuminate each behaviour was required. According to Webb (1997) phenomenography does not have a particular view of humanity since it is entirely interpretive and descriptive. It, therefore, makes no critical claims. Webb (1997) argues that phenomenography does not take the social context of education into consideration. He justifies this argument by stating that phenomenography is:

"Not in any sense politically radical and no responsibility is placed upon lecturers to produce social reformers, to motivate transformative intellectuals, to argue the oppressive nature of education within an unequal society or to call for deschooling." (Webb, 1997, p. 198)

Phenomenography in the above regard claims to be neutral in terms of its relationship with the learners (participants). It assumes an interpretive position regarding values and interests by acknowledging their existence without critiquing their power. In my study, some of the phenomenographic categories that emerged from the data reflected power issues. Many researchers feel that it would be a hindrance to their practice if value positions and ideologies are factored into their research (Webb, 1997). The author goes on to critique phenomenography for the supposed observational and interpretive neutrality of the researcher, that is usually characteristic of positivistic researchers. He further claims that the qualitative nature of phenomenography is underdeveloped in terms of its inability to exhibit hermeneutical values that are typically associated with human beings. Webb (1997) challenges the qualitative positioning of phenomenography by stating that a tension exists between Enwistle's argument that qualitative analysis requires 'rigour' and carries the 'hallmarks' of scientific research and, at the same time, seeks 'empathetic understanding'.

Webb's critique questions the location of phenomenography within an interpretive paradigm and raises a suspicion that phenomenography's methods appear to seek a quest for positivist truths which allow for broad generalisations rather than a hermeneutical understanding of the

participants' ways of experiencing the phenomenon. In my attempt at data collection and analysis, I remained faithful to the phenomenographic approach by adhering to the stipulated hermeneutic processes that enabled me to arrive at the categories of description. However, at that point, the research shifted to a more critical approach as I adopted a critical lens to further explore and illuminate the categories of description. The paradigmatic shift also allowed me to account for why such categories emerged.

I became increasingly uncomfortable with the interpretive relationship I had with the data in wanting to account for and describe the participants' experiences. The phenomenographic analysis only allowed for a description of the participants' experiences and did not account for how the categories had power over their realities. As a researcher, I was no longer satisfied with just tracing the participants' experiences and describing them. My relationship with the research phenomenon underwent a significant shift due to my response to the emergent categories. I increasingly felt the need to analyse the participants' experiences regarding the issues of power and control, discrimination and marginalisation that emerged. As a result of this epistemological disposition, I was prompted to engage with a *critical discourse analysis* (CDA) to more fully account for the phenomenographic findings in the data. The shift from a descriptive, interpretive paradigm to this 'emancipatory paradigm' allowed me to explore why the participants in the study constructed their relationship with the phenomenon in the way they did. Luckett (1995) claims that it is within this paradigm that the teaching and learning experiences should be subjected to an 'ideology critique' so that the 'political and socio-economic' causes of what might be considered 'natural' could be exposed. The critical paradigm asks

questions such as "whose interests are served by the curriculum? What curriculum would promote greater equity, emancipation, and social justice? How is power distributed in the teaching and learning process? And how can it be more equitably distributed?" (Grundy, 1987, p. 12). Thus, while CDA was used to augment the phenomenographic analysis, due to the nature of the categories which emerged from the data, it cannot be denied that it entailed an ontological shift within me as a researcher (Reddy, 2010).

My foray into phenomenography has clarified the appropriateness of conducting research within particular socio-political environments wherein not just the voices of participants and their experiences are adequate for analysis. Such systems inherently embedded issues of inequity and injustice, and my research approach attempted to contribute to understanding how these hegemonic forces are at play. The very social system itself came to be embedded in making sense of the field participants' experiences and my analysis.

3 An extended phenomenological approach: Researching student teachers' lived experiences of diversity (Author C)

Beyond adherence to founding canonical phenomenology

Like the co-authors above, who are now seasoned researchers, I (Author C), as a novice researcher, came to question the theoretical framework I chose during the early stages of developing a doctoral research project. My study focussed on *student teachers' experiences as they negotiated their trajectory through initial teacher education*. I was interested in why students resisted moving out of their comfort zones (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). I drew on the canonical works of phenomenology as a philosophical positioning originating in the 20th century

with the corpus of Edmund Husserl and repeated in authors such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I humbly sat at their feet especially inspired by those scholars who regard Edmund Husserl as the father (Koopman & Koopman, 2020; Koopman, 2017; Weimin, 2008; Groenewald, 2004; Devenish, 2002). The classical phenomenological approach was initially considered an appropriate choice for my study. However, I soon realised that this approach would only gather me vague descriptive-level insight into the studied phenomenon. Husserl posited a descriptive analysis of consciousness, proposed as the transcendental foundation for all other sciences (Husserl, 1983). In later years, phenomenological philosophers expanded on this approach to include more hermeneutical and existential issues, emphasising themes such as embodiment, being in the world, and action (Cerbone, 2014). The main argument made by Husserl is that a lived reality in the world exists (pure consciousness), and the person experiencing the event is living their actual truth. I embraced the potential to read the world of my student-teachers' experiences and designed research instruments appropriately to yield such insights about teacher professional development (Gallagher, 2020, p. 1). Using a traditional phenomenological lens, I probed the conscious truths of my participants' professional development.

I respect that phenomenology is concerned with an individual's lived experience of the everyday world. Although scholars have differing opinions, the common features of phenomenology are agreed upon and described as:

1. "A belief in the importance, and a sense of the primacy, of subjective consciousness

2. An understanding of consciousness as active, as meaning bestowing, and

3. A claim that there are specific essential structures to the consciousness of which we gain direct knowledge" (Curtis and Mays, 1978 cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 23).

However, I considered classical phenomenology somewhat limiting in the South African context. I saw broader value in providing insightful interpretations of the lived experiences of my students, whom I deemed to be subjugated by the authoritarianist curriculum dictates of official teacher education. My student reflections during interviews revealed that the institutionalised curriculum primarily regulated students to be mere recipients of the lecturers' wisdom and their worldview. This was despite the professed claims that the curriculum intended to liberate students' potential as prospective professionals. I wanted to know more about who these students were and *what made them resist the opportunities to embrace other ways of being and becoming beyond what apartheid schooling and higher education had offered them.* Canonical phenomenology allowed me to listen attentively to my participants' interpreted worldviews and lived experiences, yet it seemed to exclude broader framing sociological context from which the participants arose. *What explained why the student experienced their teacher education the way they did?* Traditional phenomenology seemed to advise me that this explanatory level was unnecessary since the prime focus was on the experience itself.

The social, economic, and political dimensions of experience

However, as I progressed with fieldwork, it became apparent that these students' curriculum and institutional experiences are not independent of a circumscribed sociological, economic, and political context. I agreed with Koopman and Koopman (2020, p. 1), who profess the philosophical belief that:

"[Phenomenology as a] method of research in education is particularly important in South Africa because it opens the door to the consciousness and subconsciousness of research participants in order to understand how their mindsets have been affected by various forces: that is, the social, cultural, political, and economic forces of influence."

In other words, when working in phenomenology, they recommend that phenomenological researchers appreciate the fullness of the participants' selves. Koopman & Koopman's view (2020, p1) argue that "important human qualities such as kindness, care and compassion towards others, particularly in our role as educators" should be embraced when conducting phenomenological research in education. The individual (living body) is a source of knowledge in its plenitude.

I further came to read other works that challenge a purely subjectivist primacy of consciousness whilst still operating within the overall tradition of phenomenology. My exploration encountered Dyring and Grøn (2022), who argued for a *critical phenomenology* that respectfully foregrounds the lifeworlds of those existing on the margins of society: for example, "people of colour, queer people, drug users, homeless people, and people living with dementia or other mental illnesses" (Dyring & Grøn, 2022, p.1). A critical phenomenology interprets experiences within the power dynamics of societal structures. I resonated with these sentiments because I, too, as a person of colour relegated to the fringes of normative South African apartheid (post)schooling, had experienced living on the margins of dominant hegemonies. The student-teachers also emanate from the margins in a post-democratic South African society, and their TP school choices and experiences reflect their hesitancy to embrace otherness. The psychological continuity of the past allowed me to question further why inequity endures despite laudable policies steering new possibilities for a just society. In theory, higher education institutions in South Africa ought to be spaces that bring together diverse students from these historicised, bifurcated social learning spaces (Smith, 2020).

I chose specifically to explore how these students tackled diversity experiences during their exposure to unfamiliar Teaching Practicum (TP) contexts which were part of their official teacher education curriculum requirements. The students were placed into TP schools, unlike the ones they went to as school learners. The purposively selected sample varied in race, gender, religious beliefs, ethnicity, language and age. The study's primary objective was to gain insight into the quality of their TP experiences related to power dynamics within the various TP schooling sites and how this may (or may not) influence their professional learning. A *critical phenomenological* approach emerged as a valuable lens and tool for data production and analysis.

I believe that a traditional phenomenological approach to the phenomenon would have rendered only

shallow insight into the operational understanding of the phenomenon. I wanted not just to know what the student teachers' experiences were, but what explains the character of those experiences. I expected that schooling sites would enable spaces to activate student teachers' professional development. However, preliminary data analysis revealed that most students reported hesitancy to return to their TP schooling contexts after graduation. I am still in the initial stages of data analysis, yet, I am emerging with a view that a critical phenomenological approach can potentially generate more profound insight into the aftermath of a society still plagued by various power dynamics. Within the Western Cape (Cape Town, South Africa), the acute geographical placement of marginalised people has influenced their conceptions of belonging within the post-democratic, socially just country.

I acknowledge the potential of classical phenomenology as a theoretical starting point that advocates the study of the direct experience taken at face value; and one which sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of the experience rather than by external, objective, and physically described reality. However, critical phenomenology extends this individualistic focus to embrace critiques of societal structures (inspired by critical theory or poststructuralism) that orchestrate the potential of individuals. Critical phenomenology merges individualistic, socio-political, and cultural dimensions of experience, and highlights the means to live under conditions that still sustain injustice (Dyring, 2022). By philosophically using critical phenomenology as a theory and methodology within my PhD study, I endorse Guenther's (2019) argument that a critical turn is merely an acknowledgement of the traces of criticality that were embedded in the canonical phenomenological respect for individuals' experienced worlds. This is made more explicit by locating the approach within the discourses of social justice and equity from more radical, emancipatory perspectives.

Reading through the canon and beyond

I became aware that the paradigmatic home of phenomenology within an interpretivist paradigm was being challenged by critical phenomenology. Alternative terms such as *emancipatory research* and *radical phenomenology* have become useful probes as I expand my foray into critical phenomenology. Thankfully, these terms opened a doorway to various philosophical research framings challenging canonical phenomenology. I list the threefold challenges critiquing canonical phenomenology as a research approach:

- *Phenomenology **applauds** the first-person account of phenomena as they manifest in their experience or how they perceive and understand phenomena regardless of the **exactness** of the experience. Such 'exactness' excludes a broader sociological locatedness of the individual it seeks to understand.*

- *Phenomenology uses an **in-house language** which caters only for those who are privy to understanding it. The historical terms of this philosophy include 'epoché', 'dasein', and other scripted coded phrases. As a novice researcher, grappling with the complex jargon of the theoretical worldview of phenomenology proved arduous. I questioned whether this resulted from my reading of original texts translated from other languages (German or French) into English (the medium of my reading).*

- *Novice phenomenologists may become inundated with **excessive data production,** resulting in being*

overwhelmed when undertaking the analysis within a set timeframe.

My present circumstances of embracing and expanding traditional phenomenology were akin to designing and building my house simultaneously. My supervisors advised me that such dialogicality was not problematic but theoretically resourceful.

My choices for a future perspective

Duvenage (2002) argues that South African researchers are on a quest for alternate philosophical drives to steer more relevant research. Some scholars have opted to embrace radical decolonisation (in all its contested variant forms) to examine the local higher education landscape curriculum (America, Edwards & Robinson, 2021; Jansen & Walters, 2022). This search for alternative philosophical standings requires leaving behind British Idealism and European continental thinking (Duvenage, 2002). Nevertheless, the overlooked intellectual discourse of phenomenology is starting to receive recognition as one possible alternative. Through the works of southern scholars, a re-imagined phenomenological orientation which embraces socio-historical locatendness is emerging as a starting point (*see* Koopman & Koopman, 2020). South Africa has a history plagued by heritages systems of inclusion and exclusion (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019), which makes for insightful exploratory studies. The authors argue that one would have benefited or suffered from the segregation based on one's specific geographic location, racial, gendered or class orientation. My emerging purpose, linked to these experiences of prejudice, is to understand why despite a democratic constitution and new legislative policies that aim to democratise the education system at all levels: geographic,

race, class and gender disparities continue to prevail in learning/teaching spaces.

As a postgraduate researcher who has embraced (at the moment) the works of various canonical phenomenological scholars, I am patently aware of tensions experienced by student teachers who are aspiring future professionals. However, I will not only focus on the consciousness of their developmental learning experiences. I extend the current potential of phenomenology to that of *critical phenomenology,* which foregrounds experiences of marginalisation, oppression, and power to identify a transcendental experience (Weiss, Salamon & Murphy, 2019). I undertake to foreground experienced power dynamics in any form which may have arisen during the placement periods during TP. Utilising a critical phenomenological approach can influence my understanding of the research study's phenomenon, but importantly, hopefully, provide a deeper paradigmatic embracing of both an interpretivist and a critical paradigmatic worldview. This marriage could be considered heretical to those interested in the conventional surveilling of the borders between paradigms. Instead, like Lather (1997), I embrace the possibility of blurring boundaries and arguing for paradigmatic proliferation rather than singularity. My future analytical insights, drawn from a pluri-versal stance, will be made more evident after completing my doctoral study.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS: Understanding our researcher disquiets

A meta-analysis of the three above reflections suggests that all three authors were originally comfortable with their traditional canonical research approaches as they commenced with their studies. These interpretivist theoretical foundations

allowed them insight into the phenomenon of subjective learning and lived experiences of students they were studying. However, as researchers involved in co-construction of their findings from the field, each of them came to interpret their emergent initial results as somewhat limiting and disconnected from their own personal experiences of negotiating working, teaching and researching in an evolving democracy. By contrast, their participants seemed to offer insights into reading of their world as complex and intersected with the socio-historical connections of time and space. Each of the authors came to experience the disquiets of a sanitised interpretation of only the internal landscape of the nature of the students' learning and lived experiences. The findings offered limited leverage to activate alternative interpretations to shift the historicised worldviews of their students. Sedimented acceptance of the status quo of the inequities of the social contexts was strongly dominant in their fieldwork analysis. Notably, the campaign for a democratic transformed society (a founding principle of post-apartheid endeavours) was imbued with the potential not to accept the locatedness in the past but tackle enabling opportunities to disrupt into new ways of being and becoming. Their expectation of research outcomes offered potential for a chosen destabilisation of the present to move their students into future possibilities.

The findings reveal firstly that the evolving *lifehistory research* (LHR) on life experiences has been spurred on to shift from its individualistic liberal discourse as a form of 'vanity research' towards a broader understanding of the lived experience that is understood not in 'internal rationalities' but as embedded within a social context. LHR came to include not only a focus on individuals but also groups and institutional systems. Secondly, an analysis of

phenomenographical research which looked at how and why the experiential processes of learning occur within a medical education curriculum space recommends that an alternative more critical and sociological analytical lens was needed to interpret the complex contexts where power and marginality dominate participants learning experiences. Thirdly, the development of a theoretical lens for a prospective study, which anticipates that researching student teachers' lived experiences whilst working across diverse teaching contexts, cannot be confined to only *canonical phenomenological lenses.* The constructs of traditional phenomenology adopted need to be elaborated to incorporate the historicised and politicised systemic dimensions of lived experiences. More relevant and appropriate theoretical frameworks blended interpretivist and critical worldviews. This permeability (whilst resisted by hegemonic guardians of the canon) expands phenomenology traditions to activate prospective research studies in a continuing unequal society**.**

DISCUSSION: Towards a phenomenological turn- developing critical phenomenology

This section draws a theoretical cross-fertilisation across the three approaches described. This meta-analytical reflection below constitutes a selection of synthetic reflections leading towards the need for a "phenomenological turn" that will embrace an appropriate theoretical lens for a southern scholarship. A southern scholarship is considered to counter the worldview that localised contexts should be read through the expectations of the dominant hegemonic northern interpretations (De Sousa Santos, 2018).

These evolutionary theoretical reimaginations have been sparked by the concern that a restrictive focus on a

decontextualised knowing, with its valuing of certainties and exactitudes, could be considered at odds with a local South African context which is attempting to understand the sustained continuation of injustices that characterise a post-apartheid South African context, especially within the education system. The initial euphoria of the 1990s, where the new democratic expectations were forged along social justice and equity priorities, was a fertile space for the ascendance of new research agendas that celebrated the emerging voices of those who were previously excluded from research focus. The choices aimed to represent those previously silenced. However, restrictive interpretivist paradigmatic worldviews could unintentionally be considered as preserving the autonomy of individualistic positionalities without adequate analysis of whose interests this agenda served.

The three authors suggest that reflecting on their research positions persuaded them to reconsider their original research operations. The canonical interpretivist LHR, and the traditional phylogeographical and phenomenological approaches were considered restrictive. Moreover, the theories of scholarship they drew on were almost exclusively from outside their local contexts. This perpetuates a northern gaze of surveillance against which they wished to engage robustly as part of the interest to self-define an interpretation of local contexts.

This does not mean that this grounded localism jettisons the scholarship from the north. Instead, the agenda juxtaposes the theoretical scholars' competing, overlapping, and divergent worldviews that emanate from various contextual spaces (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The sociological space and its epistemological underpinning preferences become the research design and analysis

subject. This allows us to question whether research traditions like phenomengraphy might be complicit in sustaining empiricist and positivist quests for absolute certainties. It also allows us to challenge whether lifehistory research, whilst originating in its interpretive home, could be complicit with promoting celebratism, activating naïve narcissism, and promoting vanity. Instead, the evolving trajectories suggest the need to understand the intersection between the inner texts of our subjective interpretations and the outer texts of context in dialogical interaction.

All the above synthetic reflective perspectives suggest the need to expand beyond being imitative of canonical ways of doing and representing experience in research. This article suggests that embracing a critical phenomenological approach allows for a blurring of paradigmatic boundaries. It allows for examining experience through the lens of power, marginality, and authoritarianist injustices. A further elaboration might be offered by a deconstructivist perspective which argues that knowing experience itself is unattainable (see diagram below). The process of developing insight into experiences will always be partial and entangled in the intersections between participants, contexts, texts and tools of research. The third co-author, therefore, pushes new dimensions of research agendas to suggest that a critical phenomenology, which has early beginnings in other research contexts tackling marginality, might be appropriate for the interpretation of the South African context, in its disappointments about the lack of deep transformation.

We suggest a phenomenological turn towards a scholarship that embraces dialogicality and relationality of perspectives which could contribute to the

intersection between localised contribution of a *southern scholarship* and normative hegemonic northern impositions. *Critical phenomenology* has emancipatory potential.

The diagram below depicts the hope of the reflective process questioning our collective, dialogical construction of research agendas undertaken in this article.

Figure 1: Towards a phenomenological turn: Developing critical phenomenology.
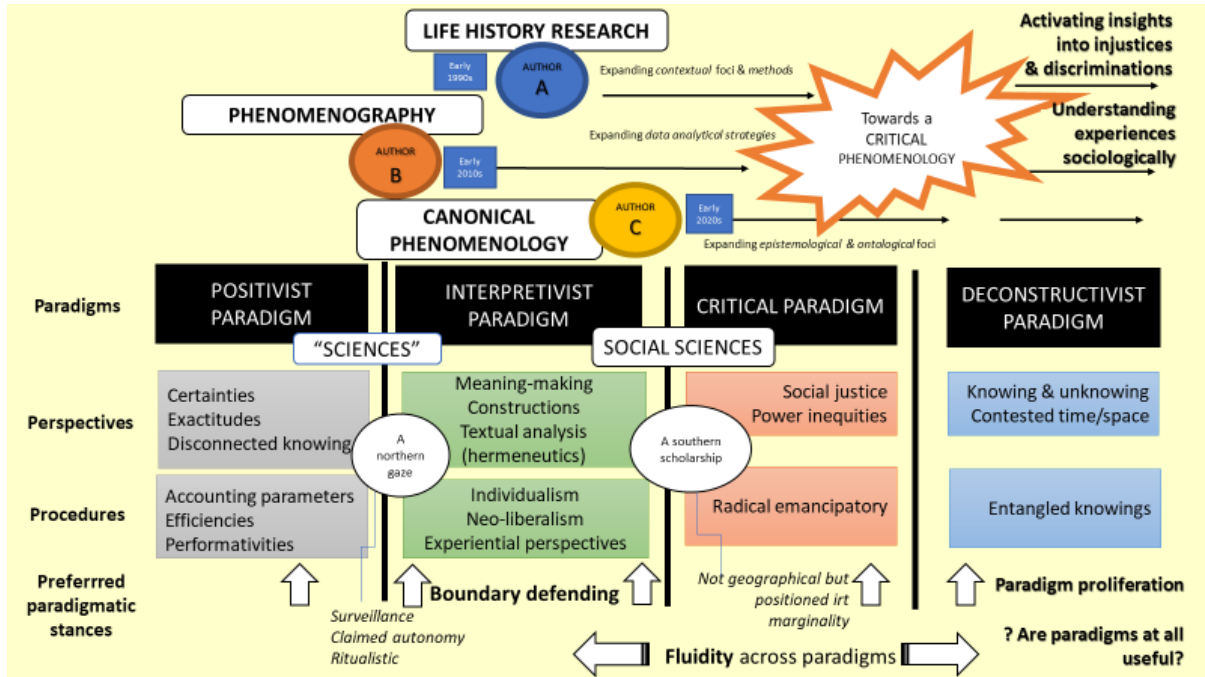
(Source: Authors' own)

This above diagram suggests that canonical research traditions reinforce the boundaries between paradigmatic positions. Protectionists of the paradigm tend to defend particular selected perspectives, which understandably bolster their epistemological worldviews. Moreover, preference is given towards established procedures which come to be circumscribed as dominant methodologies of the canonical paradigmatic home. However, this article has suggested that, especially within the realms of social sciences that explore multiplicities rather than singular universal truths, all of the paradigms could work in more collaborative rather than oppositional ways. A blurring and permeability across the paradigmatic landscape (as depicted in the diagram above) would likely permit cross-pollination of ideas, perspectives and methodological

options for research. The diagram suggests that researching lived experience cannot be confined only to the interpretivist paradigmatic home. We have argued that research production should expand beyond "boundary defending", and should be directed towards a continuing re-examination of our epistemological and ontological roots. We, therefore, support the notion of paradigmatic proliferation that occurs when borders are erased and fluidity promoted. Nevertheless, given our interests in southern scholarship, we are also aware of how the northern gaze influences the work of scholars who sit at the margins of hegemonic centres. Our concerns are consciously directed towards realising greater social justice in the interest of challenging discrimination and prejudices. We argue that a critical phenomenological approach to researching

experience would contribute towards a new sociological historicised and political project that research can become.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We anticipate that this directive towards a critical phenomenological turn might be considered disrespectful of the canons of phenomenological research. However, the overall direction of the article is inspired by the resistance to being complicit with the surveillance of theoretical interpretations that emanate from outside the lived experiences of marginalised individuals and groups. Knowledge, power and context are tripartite entities that intersect and activate appropriate scholarship. We believe that this critical phenomenological approach has the potential to tackle the continuing endurance of social injustices, inequities and marginalities in profound and significant ways. Future research should extend this exploratory article to question how research agendas come to be chosen by individuals, groups or institutions, and how theoretical frameworks select perspectives and methodological choices in different contextual spaces. How do those on the periphery choose their theoretical research orientations? As varied researchers coming from divergent, transforming spaces and times, we have demonstrated the benefits of critically reviewing our own research experiences and choices. We, as researchers, can choose criticality as a conduit.

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