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Contextualizing phenomenology in event management research

Deciphering the meaning of event experiences

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Abstract

Purpose – Although the core phenomenon of events is the experiences and the meanings attached to them, there is limited management research on the experiential, existential and ontological dimensions of events. Phenomenology provides a sound philosophical framework for studying the multifaceted dimensions of experiences and associated meanings of events. However, quite surprisingly, phenomenology has not yet been systematically applied on the event management field. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to introduce phenomenology to the study of events, demonstrate its value for the field and encourage as well as guide its application on event management research.

Design/methodology/approach – A review and synthesis of the main phenomenological streams of thought was undertaken in order to develop a research paradigm for the application of phenomenology on the event management field.

Findings – The paper explains why phenomenology is needed in the study of events and their management, its conceptual underpinnings and streams of thought and finally suggests a research framework for conducting phenomenological studies in event management.

Research limitations/implications – The consequences of the phenomenological perspective are delineated for explaining how the study of event meanings and experiences can be undertaken from this perspective. The limitations of phenomenology are noted such as the emphasis on “lifeworld” subjectivity and subsequent difficulty to claim the generalizability of research findings.

Practical implications – The suggested research framework can guide future event management research on how to apply phenomenology to the study of event experiences and meanings. On this basis, practitioners can get insight regarding how to develop and design events that optimize the perceived experiences of attendees.

Originality/value – While the experiential paradigm and the phenomenological turn have been spread across many disciplines emphasizing the essence of lived experiences in a variety of human interactions and exchanges, the event management field lags behind. This is unfortunate and has to be addressed as the experiences and meanings shape the essence of events. Therefore, this conceptual paper hopes to inspire, encourage and guide event management researchers to embrace and apply the phenomenological perspective on their future research endeavors, which can profitably complement and expand the predominant research paradigms in the field.

Keywords Phenomenology, Experience, Meaning, Existentialism, Ontology

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The essence of any type of event is that of providing an experience (both on the individual and collective levels) that has been purposefully designed or at least facilitated to enhance its impact on the audience and participants (Getz, 2012). This makes as the core phenomenon of events the lived experiences and the meanings attached to them (Getz, 2008, 2012). Consequently, the study of events needs to better



understand the character and meaning of people's experiences in them and the consequences for their effective management and design. In this endeavor it should not be overlooked that an experiential focus on events is intertwined with the personal, existential and socio-cultural dimensions that underlie the ontological human need to find symbolic expression through events and shape pertinent meanings (Geertz, 1973; Handelman, 1990; Turner, 1974).

Evidently, there is limited management research on the experiential, existential and ontological dimensions of events. A concerted understanding of these dimensions may draw important theoretical and practical implications for event planning helping thus to design events that enhance the experiences of attendees. Phenomenology provides a sound philosophical framework (i.e. ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological) for studying the multifaceted dimensions of experiences and associated meanings of events. However, quite surprisingly, phenomenology has not yet been widely and systematically applied on the event management field. This conceptual paper aims to delineate the scope of phenomenology to the study of events, demonstrate its value for the field and encourage as well as guide its application on event management research.

Putting phenomenology into event management research: understanding the meaning of event experiences

Why is phenomenology needed in the study of events and their management? Phenomenology is a philosophical and methodological line of thought that can be used for examining in-depth the event experience. The goal of phenomenology is to enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences (Spiegelberg, 1982). Phenomenological inquiry is a direct description of experience without taking account of its psychological origin (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenology, hence, is a critical reflection on conscious experience, rather than subconscious motivation, and is designed to uncover the essential invariant features of that experience (Jopling, 1996).

From a phenomenological perspective, the starting question for uncovering, analyzing and understanding the lived event experiences and meanings attached to them, is: how do people perceive their experience of an event and assign associated meanings? This matter, however, is further complicated as people may perceive the same experiences in different ways subsequently assigning different meanings to their lived event experiences. Consequently, this makes essential to understand the ways that meaning is shaped as a result of the event attendee's interaction with the intended experience being offered by an event. In doing so, the characteristics that make an experience meaningful for event participants and audiences can be better understood so that event elements and activities are effectively designed and leveraged to magnify the impact of an event experience.

The presence of meaning as a concept and its problematics is ubiquitous across epistemological and ontological realms. From a social constructionist perspective, meaning is defined as the "individual signification or the internal symbolization, representation, and conceptualization of the external world" (Gergen, 1994, p. 19). For phenomenologists and particularly Heidegger (1927/1996), meaning cannot be separated from ontological structures; hence, it is inseparable from the context and situation in which an individual is placed. In this regard, meaning constitutes understanding within the context of a certain lifeworld or perspective. The search, thus, for meaning requires investigate a lifeworld and its horizon of understanding. In other words, according to Heidegger, the use and meanings of things are always related to existential possibilities or to a very concrete manner in which individuals exist in the world.

Meanings in events constitute personal and social constructs including all experiences, feelings and thoughts as well as the subsequent sense of salience that people obtain from their participation in, or attendance of, event-based activities. In general, meaning is a continually problematic accomplishment of human interaction fraught with change, novelty, and ambiguity (Brissett and Edgley, 2005). Likewise, meaning in events is a complex manifestation of interacting forces that shape a polysemic tapestry of understandings and perceptions. Such a tapestry includes personal, existential, ontological and socio-cultural dimensions that epitomize the symbolic expression of meaning(s) and the processes of their extraction. This is well delineated in the social and cultural anthropology literature (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Handelman, 1990; Turner, 1974) that examines the socio-cultural aspects of events and thus provides a foundation for their study. This line of inquiry, however, is rarely integrated in event management research, while its relationship with phenomenology within the context of events remains ambiguous.

Phenomenology can shed light on the multifaceted nature of event meanings and their polysemic grounds that are conveyed symbolically, often patterned by culture, to manifest local values and meanings. To effectively employ the phenomenological perspective, it is essential to understand the ontological and existential nature of events as described in the social and cultural anthropology. Events as expressive practices are intertwined with layers of social ordering and negotiation that imbue with significance their enactment. According to Geertz (1973), all social interaction is symbolic and meaning is derived from how these symbols are constructed and put to use. In this regard, events provide conduits for the production and expression of symbols that interpret and/or (re)construct social conditions.

In this fashion, Turner's (1974) notion of social drama enacted through events exemplifies the dramaturgic nature of events as commentaries and critiques on, or as celebrations of, different dimensions of human relatedness whereby a group of community not merely expresses itself but, more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself. Likewise, Handelman's (1990) theorization of events as dense concentrations of symbols and locations of communication that convey participants into versions of social order exemplifies that their mandate is to engage in the ordering of ideas, people and conditions. On this basis, phenomenology can be used to analyze how symbolic meanings are perceived and interpreted by event attendees as a result of their lived experiences and interaction with an event environment and, in turn, what are the effects on social conditions. In doing so, phenomenology needs to be profitably integrated with the anthropological based work on events, thereby framing eventually a hybrid holistic perspective on the phenomenology of event experiences and meanings.

In particular, the phenomenological line of inquiry requires get in-depth individual accounts from people that describe, explain and assign meaning to various event experiences (Getz, 2012). The purpose thus is to systematically analyze and compare the feelings, moods, thoughts and convictions of different individuals in order to draw patterns and describe variance that characterize an event experience. Put simply, phenomenology can help us study in-depth, appreciate and understand the meaning of event experiences as these were lived and perceived by different individuals. In this vein, phenomenology essentially directs attention toward studying in concert two matters:

- (1) to identify the characteristics and qualities of an experience; and
- (2) to investigate the grounding layers of conscious experience that shape the meaning of events and their impact on people.

According to Getz (2008, 2012), event experiences should be conceptualized and studied in terms of three interrelated dimensions: what people are doing, or behavior (the “conative” dimension), their emotions, moods, or attitudes (the affective’ dimension), and cognition (awareness, perception, understanding). In the same vein, Getz (2012) developed a model of the planned event experience, which provides a holistic understanding of the event experience, from the needs, motivations, attitudes and expectations brought to the events, through the actual living experience that shapes event meanings and influences future behavior. This model, based largely on the social and anthropological literature pertaining to liminality, has at its core an experiential liminal/liminoid zone that characterizes an event as a special place in a special time outside the routine and restrictions of normal life. In other words, the celebratory nature of events can engender a liminal/liminoid space/time where people feel more comfortable, uninhibited and are open to new ideas. Liminality can thus foster feelings of separation from normal life, loss of identity and social status as well as encourage role reversals particularly through *communitas* that enables a sense of communal bonding and camaraderie suspending normal social rules and boundaries.

The whole event experience of liminality comprises anticipation before the event, involvement/engagement during the event and reversion to normal life after the event ends. Hence, a comprehensive understanding of the event experience requires study the antecedents, the different dimensions of involvement/engagement and the reversion to normal life, which as Getz (2012) emphasizes, should be accompanied by a sense of change, accomplishment, renewal, transformation, relief or loss in order for the experience to be special and memorable. In this regard, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975, 1990) theory of flow fits into this model describing essentially a phenomenology of enjoyment. According to this theory, people seek intrinsically rewarding experiences leading to optimal arousal and flow, which can be characterized by exhilaration/immersion in activity, a sense of accomplishment or transformation. Event managers thus need to know how to facilitate flow and foster a high level of involvement in the event, which can be reported in a phenomenological examination of event attendees’ experiences.

In terms of the formation and effects of event meanings, a dramaturgical perspective is useful for studying the ways events and their elements or symbols exemplify expressive and dramatic dimensions (Schechner, 2003) that shape a symbolic context in which people interpret the order of conditions that make up their lived experiences. On these grounds, Ziakas and Costa (2012, p. 32) put forward the concept of event dramaturgy, defined as “the extraction of shared meanings enabled by the projection and/or performance of symbolic representations in an event’s activities.” They based this definition on Goffman’s (1959) notion of dramaturgy as a theatrical metaphor that explains social behavior and Turner’s (1969, 1974) conceptualization of event performances as forms of rituals and social dramas that are expressed on the collective level. The conceptualization of event dramaturgy links performative behavior with the making of social order. It exemplifies that the performances unfolded in events are meta-commentaries or texts within metaphoric messages that respond to the problematics of public discourse and substantiate the symbolic foundations of social ordering. Thus, event managers need to know how the design of different event elements (i.e. activities, theming, symbols, etc.) is perceived by attendees through their lived experience and how they could optimize the potential of events to express the elemental grounds of local cultural fabrics and

convey threads of shared meaning. In this regard, dramaturgy can guide the design of both the stage (setting) and performance (the entire experience), thereby applying experiential design to all aspects of event planning and implementation with the purpose to create desired perceptions, cognition and behavior (Berridge, 2007).

On the whole, phenomenology can be employed to provide a holistic account of the event experience by drawing upon the anthropological notion of liminality and incorporating the theoretical approaches of flow and dramaturgy. This integrative endeavor synthesizing different theoretical frameworks as they apply to the context of events, warrants the generation of a new hybrid perspective on the phenomenology of event experiences and meanings. It should be noted that although phenomenology does not study the psychological origins of human behavior, its integration within the context of events, as Getz (2012) notes, offers considerable scope for a better understanding of event experiences because it focusses on the individual's state of mind (their consciousness and behavior) while experiencing the event.

Specifically, the phenomenological perspective can study people's consciousness, feelings, views and behavior simultaneously. For example, Chen's (2006) phenomenological study of highly involved members of a fan club revealed important personal constructs of the meanings attached to their fan-related event experiences. The study by employing a means-end chain approach examined the attributes, consequences and values associated with event sport tourists' behavior concluding that socialization was one of the most important aspects of the fans' experiences, consisting of developing one's sense of self-being through friendships, social support and identification with a group. Moreover, Xing and Chalip (2009, 2012) adopted a hermeneutical phenomenological perspective to capture the experience and meaning of employees working in Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games. Ziakas and Boukas (2013) explored through a phenomenological lens the experiences of event tourists attending the carnival of Limassol in Cyprus and the meanings they extract from the event. These studies illustrate that there is indeed a fruitful ground for advancing knowledge on the different event experiences through phenomenological methods, which need to be synthesized in order to generate an integrative phenomenological framework of event experiences and meanings.

Theoretical streams and tenets of phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (1970), who is considered the fountainhead of phenomenology, established this philosophical movement as a reaction to psychologism (i.e. the act of explaining phenomena in psychological terms without first understanding the experience of the phenomenon under investigation) and claimed that philosophers intuit the essence of an experience without the necessity of recourse to other experiences. According to Fouche (1993), Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is grounded on the perception that individuals can be certain about how things perform in, or represent themselves to, their consciousness. Heidegger (1927/1996) built on Husserl's ideas but further developed the phenomenological perspective, arguing that the understanding of experiences is always situated within a world and in ways of being (lifeworld). Therefore, Husserl's conception that consciousness is intentional, is transformed in Heidegger's existential phenomenology, into that for appropriately designating the experience, we need to find the being for whom such a description is significant.

As such, phenomenology is a philosophical line of thought and research methodology that deals with the examination and the meanings of specific phenomena

as they are experienced and perceived (Santos and Yan, 2010) and may not be directly understood in surface responses (Goulding, 2004). According to van Manen (2007, p. 11): “phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence.” In this regard, phenomenology studies the experience from the view of the individual, while the phenomenological methods are based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and pay attention to the significance of personal standpoint and interpretation (Lester, 1999). Hence, all the variables outside the immediate experience need to be neglected while the external world must be studied by examining the contents of personal consciousness (Groenewald, 2004). As Husserl supported, realities are thus treated as pure phenomena and the only absolute data from where to begin, which was captured by the slogan “back to the things themselves.”

From a methodological standpoint, phenomenology integrates details of experience frequently at the level of ordinary everyday life (Schutz, 1967). As Schutz (1967) argues, human beings along with their fellow human beings experience culture and society, position themselves regarding their objects as well as act upon and are influenced by them. In this sense, phenomenology as a methodological approach aims to create deep understanding of direct experiences that are based on conscious actions, underlining also their important determinants and characteristics.

The conceptions of phenomenology by Husserl and Heidegger have been expanded by other philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Creswell, 2007; Ehrich, 2005). For conceptualizing phenomenology, Creswell (2007) suggests that its use today points out to diverse philosophical arguments than those of Husserl's. Though, the author mentions that all these philosophical assumptions are based on some common logic that includes the examination of individuals' lived experiences, the presupposition that these experiences are conscious, and that these experiences are described and not explained or analyzed. As such, Stewart and Mickunas (1990) argue that there are four main philosophical approaches in phenomenology:

- (1) a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy, where philosophy is considered as a search of wisdom rather than exploring the world with empirical means;
- (2) a philosophy without presuppositions, where all judgments about what is real are suspended until they are founded on a more definite basis;
- (3) the intentionality of consciousness, where the reality of an object is related to an individual's consciousness of it; and
- (4) the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy, where the reality of an object is apparent only within the meaning of the individual's experience.

Accordingly, phenomenology has various approaches that all aim to realize human life through experience (Barritt *et al.*, 1985). Three approaches are the most prevalent:

- (1) empirical phenomenology;
- (2) existential phenomenology; and
- (3) hermeneutic phenomenology.

Empirical phenomenology comes from the Duquesne School and has been strongly influenced by Giorgi (1989). Empirical phenomenology concentrates on the production of precise descriptions of human experience provided by individuals' re-lived

experiences of a phenomenon (Ehrich, 2005; Oberg and Bell, 2012). Creswell (2007) argues that the researcher brackets out an individual's experiences and collects data from several people who have experienced the phenomenon. Then, the phenomenologist analyzes the data by minimizing the data into meaningful statements or quotes and combines them into themes. Finally, the researcher implements: a textural description of the individuals' experiences that mentions what participants experienced; a structural description of their experiences that indicates how the participants experienced the phenomenon in terms of conditions, situations or context; and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to deliver an overall essence of the experience. Oberg and Bell (2012) argue that in the third stage this composite essence removes the individual's presence in the analysis to a more common and whole description. They point out that empirical phenomenology seeks to find out what is the shared essence of the phenomena and regards the research as part of a wider examination, a conversation with others in the community about the meaning of findings.

Existential phenomenology views individuals as being mainly concerned with their experiences of the world (Oberg and Bell, 2012). According to Thompson *et al.* (1989), existential phenomenology is a paradigm for understanding, conceptualizing and examining experiences and is rooted in the premises of existentialism and the methods of phenomenology. Valle *et al.* (1989) argue that existential phenomenology seeks to comprehend the events of human existence in an approach that does not consider presuppositions of the cultural heritage (mainly philosophical dualism and technologism) in the degree that this can be achieved. In this regard, existential phenomenology aims to illuminate the nature of a phenomenon as a basic human experience and to discover those experiences within the world. On these grounds, Thompson *et al.* (1989), stress the characteristics of existential phenomenology:

- the experience is viewed as a pattern that emerges from a context;
- the experience and the world are seen as co-constituting;
- the research emphasis focusses on the experience and the research perspective is presented from a first-person view;
- the phenomenologists attempt to capture a pattern as it emerges (apodictic research logic);
- the research strategy focusses to relate descriptions of specific experiences to each other and to the overall context of the lifeworld (holistic research strategy); and
- the research targets to provide a thematic description of the experience.

As Oberg and Bell (2012) note, in existential phenomenology the basis of phenomenology has been moved from an epistemological to an ontological one. In this respect, individuals are constantly limited in what they can do contingent upon the context and the cultural, social and psychological conditions. Hence, positionality is both free but also attached to the natural/external world.

Finally, hermeneutic phenomenology is widely discussed by Van Manen of the Utrecht School in the Netherlands (Ehrich, 2005). As Ehrich (2005) argues, in hermeneutic phenomenology researchers interpret an individual's experience as though it were a text while the outcomes of these studies are seen as texts that provide rich and deep accounts of phenomena. According to Creswell (2007), hermeneutic

phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also considered as an interpretive process in which the phenomenologist makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences. In this respect, hermeneutic phenomenology is based on three elements (Oberg and Bell, 2012):

- (1) an individual's prejudice;
- (2) the individual's preconceptions are generated from experience almost impossible to ignore; and
- (3) the understanding of the world can be best managed through dialogue.

Consequently, when one individual expresses his/herself and the other comprehends, an experience of common human consciousness is revealed. Ehrich (2005) mentions that hermeneutic phenomenology uses "self" as a starting point but it is also based on other individuals and other sources of data using less prescriptive methods of doing research, while it is not inductively empirically derived.

All the aforementioned approaches share a number of common characteristics as they had been built on a common ground before they have diverged. Table I briefly identifies and explains the key terms of phenomenology that underpin its conceptual grounds. In terms of what approach is more appropriate for conducting research, the phenomenological approaches need to be selected or synthesized according to the nature and characteristics of the phenomenon to be studied. In the event management field, existential and hermeneutic phenomenology are particularly useful because they can investigate and interpret the ontological/existential dimensions of events as experienced and perceived by people.

Term	Meaning
Intentionality	Every mental act is directed at an object while consciousness is constantly stretching out or reaching beyond itself towards something else ^a
Intuition	The theoretical act of consciousness that makes objects present to us. Reality needs to be extended to phenomena and meanings rather than objects alone. The final, broadest and presuppositionless standard of truth is intuition and not experience. All kinds of intuition are equally valuable sources of cognition ^b
Evidence	Evidence is the successful presentation of an intelligible object, the successful presentation of something whose truth becomes manifest in the evidencing itself ^c . It is the key to comprehend the value of representation in consciousness ^b
Noema	Noema is the objective sense that determines the objective reference of an act ^d . Noema refers to everything that is intended by the intentions of individuals' natural attitude such as a word, an object or another individual ^c
Empathy	An individual's experience of others as other subjects ^e
Intersubjectivity	A condition somewhere between subjectivity and objectivity, one in which a phenomenon is personally experienced (subjectively) but by more than one subject ^e
Lifeworld	The pre-given (and normally unreflected) intentional background, in which the concept of intersubjectivity can emerge ^e
Being-there	The experiences of people are essentially an inseparable part of who they are and how they conceive themselves as belonging to the world ^f

Sources: ^aHusserl (2001); ^bLevinas (1995); ^cSokolowski (2000); ^dKosowski (2010); ^eHusserl (2004); ^fHeidegger (1927/1996)

Table I.
Key terms of
phenomenology

Specifically, since events are profoundly existential dealing with the making of social order (Handelman, 1990), existential phenomenology is pivotal for event management research. Its significance has already been emphasized in consumer and tourism research as it allows an in-depth examination of people's experiences due to its ability to explore and designate multifaceted phenomena from a first-person perspective (Fahlberg *et al.*, 1992). Similarly, existential phenomenology may contribute to the understanding of the lived experiences of event audiences and participants within the complex environment that shapes their perceptions and meanings. Lastly, hermeneutics can analyze events and experiences as "texts" of a larger social order interpreting the messages conveyed within a message (expressive performance) of an event, thereby deciphering the meaning of event experiences.

The application of phenomenology on management studies has been neglected for many years mainly due to the dominance of quantitative techniques, in contrast to qualitative methods that were more obvious on education or social sciences (Ehrich, 2005). In this respect, phenomenology as a qualitative research technique has not been widely used in the management field. However, phenomenology has been effectively applied on the fields of marketing and consumer research (e.g. Churchill and Wertz, 1985; Goulding, 2004; Thompson, 1997, 1998) with notable results. In the field of tourism, phenomenology has also been applied shedding light on the nature of tourist experiences (e.g. Andriotis, 2009; Cohen, 1979; Hayllar and Griffin, 2005; Li, 2000; Masberg and Silverman, 1996; Noy, 2008; Santos and Yan, 2010; Uriely *et al.*, 2002). Likewise, the study of the immediate phenomenological leisure experience has been applied on social science approaches to leisure (Harper, 1981). Quite surprisingly, however, there are scant phenomenological studies in the field of events despite the ostensible potential of phenomenology to uncover layers of meaning in the experiences of event attendees.

On the whole, while the creation, delivery and effects of experiences has taken a central role as an area of study within the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) giving thus rise to the experiential paradigm and the phenomenological turn across several disciplines that emphasize the essence of lived experiences in a variety of human interactions and exchanges, the event management field lags behind. This is an important knowledge gap that has to be filled as the experiences and meanings shape the essence of events. Therefore, it is essential to develop a phenomenological research agenda in event management, which can profitably complement and expand the traditional research paradigms applied on the field.

A research framework for the application of phenomenology on event management

The application of phenomenology on event management as an epistemological research paradigm is grounded on the potential to examine the core phenomenon of events: experiences and meanings. Given the centrality and complexity of this matter for event management but also due to the lack of event-based theory to ground research in this area, a framework is needed for guiding how the phenomenon will be studied by employing the pertinent research design. In terms of methodology, as Holloway (1997) notes, phenomenologists are reluctant to prescribe techniques. Hycner (1999), in explaining the reluctance of phenomenologists to focus on specific steps, argues that one cannot impose method on a phenomenon "since that would do a great injustice to the integrity of that phenomenon" (p. 144). The absence of a general methodological framework makes difficult any effort to employ a phenomenological

research design in event management. Hence, the proposed phenomenological research framework incorporates practical advice, drawing primarily from Creswell (2007), Groenewald (2004), Hycner (1999) and Moustakas (1994), for providing guidance how to conduct phenomenological studies in event management. Therefore, the framework consists of two parts: a research agenda and methodological guidance.

(a) Research agenda for building theory on the experiences and meanings of events

Figure 1 depicts an illustration of the main issue areas that a phenomenology of events brings to the fore. At the core lies the experience and attached meanings obtained from an event. Main issue areas include the processes that create events, the personal impacts of event experiences on people's lives, the perception of authenticity, event design and leveraging strategies. It should be emphasized that the scope of experience and assigned meanings varies greatly in events according to the nature of an individual's involvement (e.g. participant, employee, spectator, volunteer, etc.). Thus, the perceptions of all different stakeholders can provide a wide range of insights on these issues.

Processes encompass the complex interaction among wider environmental/contextual factors (e.g. socio-cultural, political, economic, etc.) as well as the event production practices/operations. Contextual processes influence the ways that event experiences and meanings are perceived by attendees. They also influence the production of an event in terms of how experiences are created and delivered. This is not always an intentional process as what is instinctively done or not, emphasized or neglected may influence the experiences obtained and the meanings extracted from an event. Operational processes include the coordination of all organizational aspects of an event from planning to staffing and marketing and how they affect (or what impact they have on) the lived experience of attendees. Overall, it is not only important to know how event experiences are created but also how they acquire meanings that hold significance for attendees.

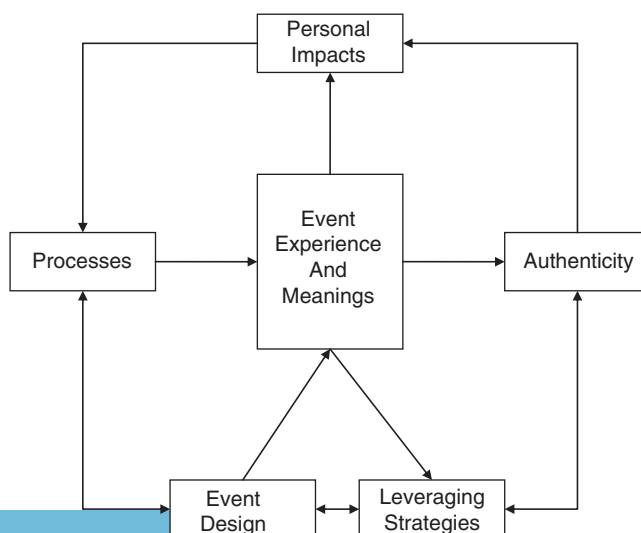


Figure 1.
Towards a
phenomenology of event
experiences and meanings

The impact of an event experience on individuals can be exemplified by the resultant roles this might take in people's lives. Put simply, how does the event influence people's lives or what transformations a person went through? To the extent that recognizable roles are identified by attendees, the assigned meanings of an event can be deciphered in terms of their contribution to the making of social order. Thus, the personal impacts of event experiences on people, if taken and appreciated collectively can influence, in turn, the processes that shape events as these are designed to cater for people's needs and preferences.

The phenomenology of events inevitably raises the question of authenticity. Since within an existential phenomenological framework that is essential in the study of events, perceptions of authenticity are considered to be contextually driven and individually determined, it is impossible to accept something universally as authentic or inauthentic. What should be asked is: are the experiences perceived as real? In other words, there is not really such a thing as authentic or inauthentic, but instead, there is an experience of something perceived as authentic or not. The matter thus for event management is to enhance the elements that facilitate the experiencing of an event in a way to be perceived as authentic.

Consequently, there are implications for event design, which is, of course, part of operational processes but its central role for event experiences warrants to be examined as a separate issue area. In this area the task is to find the means for achieving the harmonious arrangement of event elements so that they create and enhance intended experiences and meanings. Experiential design thus, which is increasingly applied to event management, can be significantly informed from the phenomenological perspective. Similarly, a phenomenological understanding of event experiences and meanings can enable their leveraging by helping to devise strategies that seek to optimize the outcomes of events.

An examination of all the above issues from a phenomenological perspective provides a fertile ground for building theory in the event management field, which has also relevance to the industry. It could be argued that as event practitioners are interested in the views of their clients so that they can satisfy their needs, in a similar way, phenomenologists study the perceptions of individuals on a given phenomenon. From this perspective, event management research should not merely seek to intuit, describe or interpret experiences and meanings, thus following one of the established streams of phenomenology, but rather it should synthesize social, anthropological and phenomenological approaches in an effort to decipher the meaning of experiences from the complex mosaic of perceptions they are intertwined, thereby generating a theoretical framework for the phenomenology of event experiences and meanings. In effect, the following research questions are proposed in Table II for guiding and encouraging event management researchers to apply a phenomenological approach.

(b) Research method and interviewing

The primary method of phenomenological data collection is interviewing. This is because the use of phenomenology is intended to understand the phenomena in their own terms (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989) by providing a description of event attendee's experiences as they were experienced by themselves and understood in their own terms. Hence, the data should be allowed to emerge in order to capture rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings (Moustakas, 1994; Pollio *et al.*, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). This requires that interviewing be an interchange of views between two persons where the researcher seeks to understand the world from the respondents'

Issue areas	Research questions
Processes	How do event experiences render meanings to people and stakeholders? What meanings do hold the most importance and how they differ among stakeholders?
Personal impacts	What roles do event experiences have within the lifeworld of attendees? How do the assigned meanings influence the lives of people?
Authenticity	What does make event experiences authentic or inauthentic in the perceptions of people and stakeholders?
Event design	How do elements of event design can be best synthesized to optimize intended experiences and meanings?
Leveraging strategies	How do event experiences and meanings can be leveraged to obtain and magnify the outcomes of an event for the host community?

Table II.
Research questions for
phenomenological issue
areas in event management

point of view and unfold the meaning of their experiences (Kvale, 1996). In this process, the researcher essentially co-creates the reality of the phenomenon as interacts with the informant, thus it is important to make the kind of questions that do not prescribe directions to answers or influence the respondent.

Consequently, the interview questions should be unstructured and open in order to allow the informants to describe and reflect on their experiences. The following queries (thematic areas) can constitute the basis of interviewing focussing on the respondents' experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions (Welman and Kruger, 1999), while probes can be used accordingly, to help informants expand on their reflections:

- How was the event experienced?
- What did attendees like in the event?
- How did attendees feel at the event?
- What were the impressions about the event?

Other methods such as experiential sampling (i.e. collecting information about the context and content of a phenomenon), diaries and observation can also be used to complement interviewing and thus provide a more holistic understanding of the event experience. However, the use of these methods can be limited depending on the size and duration of an event and, of course, the scope of an informant's involvement in the event. Generally, events with short duration do not provide much time for fieldwork, while when activities are condensed in a short time, they might limit the opportunities for reflecting on event experiences. Despite the difficulties, however, it is expected that as the number of phenomenological studies in event management grows, more sophistication will be added by employing multiple methods. The focus on interviewing here aims to serve only as a starting point by providing a solid and practical ground for event management researchers to embark on the undertaking of phenomenological inquiries.

Locating informants. The sample of informants cannot be randomly selected. Instead, informants should be located purposefully seeking for those who have had experiences relating to the phenomenon under study. In doing so, snowball sampling (Babbie, 1995) can be used to expand the sample by asking the informants to recommend others for interviewing. While the number of informants to be recruited depends on when theoretical saturation of the phenomenon under study is reached, generally the in-depth nature of interviews warrants a rich amount of data with a small

number of respondents. In general, a sample of ten informants is adequate for phenomenological interviews (Boyd, 2001; Creswell, 2007). Of course, depending on the nature of an event and research objectives, this sample can be expanded.

Bracketing interview. Phenomenologists believe that researchers cannot be detached from their own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). To minimize the influence of the researcher's preconceptions, a bracketing interview can be conducted prior to the main interviews with the selected informants. The purpose is to bracket the researcher's preconceptions and learn how to enter into the individual's lifeworld, thereby using the self as an experiencing interpreter (Miller and Crabtree, 1992).

Data explicitation. The term "analysis" of data is problematic in phenomenology. According to Hycner (1999), this term implies a breaking into parts, which may lead to a loss of the whole phenomenon. Instead, Hycner suggested the term "explicitation" of the data since this means an investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole. Explicitation entails the following stages:

- (1) Bracketing and phenomenological reduction where the researcher listens repeatedly to the recorded interviews in order to become familiar with the informants' words and tone of expression, and hence, develop a holistic understanding of the described phenomena and informants' meanings.
- (2) The researcher returns to the transcripts to delineate units of meaning by extracting statements that were seen to illuminate their experiences in the event.
- (3) Clusters of themes are formed by grouping units of meaning together to determine central themes that revealed the essence of the clusters.
- (4) Each interview is summarized incorporating all the quotes and themes elicited from the data to describe the holistic context of the event experience. Thereafter, a validity check is conducted by showing to the informants their interview summary to determine whether the essence of described experiences and meanings was correctly captured.
- (5) Based on the feedback of informants on the interview summary, the researcher identifies common themes in the interviews and individual differences, which are reported in a composite summary elaborating the thematic structure and the context from which the themes emerged.

Phenomenological discourse and directions for event management research

The phenomenological perspective suggests that phenomena cannot be separated from the context within which they occur and the manner with which they are perceived by the consciousness of individuals, thereby constructing personal reflections of reality. In the same fashion, event experiences and meanings as phenomena cannot be separated from the contextual conditions that shape them and their understanding by individual attendees reflecting thus personal constructs of meaning. Nonetheless, since the experience and performance of events occurs on the collective level, it affords them with the potential to instantiate socio-cultural constructs that interpret and/or attempt to change the conditions that make up their lives. This potential can meet the ontological and existential needs of people, hence enabling their sustainability and significance for societies.

The phenomenological perspective brings to the fore the ontological and existential potential of events by helping to overcome and synthesize an apparent dualism: on the one hand, personal experiences, and on the other hand, collective meanings. How do the individual reflections on attending at, or participating in, an event relate to the socio-cultural constructs conveyed by the event? In other words, the question is: how an individual is transformed as a result of the event experience and what effects this has on the host community? Phenomenology provides a line of thought for theory building on understanding, appreciating and enhancing the ontological and existential potential of events. Certainly, not all events have to perform this function but a concerted approach is needed for those events that aim to serve existential needs. Consequently, the application of phenomenology to event management turns the focus on the need to understand how event experiences relate to the existential needs of people in order for accordingly designing and delivering events.

Toward this end, the evolving discourse on phenomenological consumer research can inform and benefit the application of phenomenology on event management. Accordingly, Lindberg (2009) drawing primarily upon the ontology of an existential phenomenological approach, as this was delineated in Heidegger's (1927/1996) classical work "Being and Time", proposed an alternative hybrid perspective labeled "ontological consumer research," which seeks to explore and develop an alternative understanding of what it means to be a human being within commercial contexts and situations. By applying this perspective on wilderness canoe tourists, Lindberg explored the role of this consumption experience within the lifeworld of tourists and the manner in which the tourists were transformed throughout experiences. This ontological perspective by focussing on the meaning of being could supplement other approaches in the study of event experiences helping thus to decipher their meaning.

Nevertheless, in order for the event experience to be more fully understood, it is necessary to make sense of the complex factors that shape it. This highlights the importance of examining the lived experiences and meanings of individuals via the lens of a phenomenological conceptual and methodological framework complemented by other research approaches such as ethnography and participant observation in order to obtain a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon under study.

Toward this direction, it would be useful to apply an expanded framework of existential phenomenology on event management. In this respect, Askegaard and Linnet (2011) argue for an epistemological positioning of consumer culture theory research beyond the lived experience of consumers. This expands the contextualization of lived consumer experiences by taking into consideration the systemic and structuring influences of market and social systems that is not necessarily felt or experienced by consumers and therefore not necessarily expressed. The authors referred to this approach as the context of context, which explicitly connects the structuring of macro-social explanatory frameworks with the phenomenology of lived experiences. From this perspective, a comprehensive understanding of the interacting factors that shape event experiences can be achieved. On this basis, the design of event elements and symbols as well as the formulation of leveraging strategies can be grounded on the micro-social context accounted for by the individual in a broader socio-historical context.

Finally, it should be noted that the application of phenomenology is not without problems. First of all, the reluctance on following specific methodological steps impedes researchers to learn how to conduct high-quality phenomenological

studies. This is especially problematic for the event management field because there is no tradition and knowledge on phenomenology. Second, there is the danger in a phenomenological inquiry that much of the data will lack focus and remain unutilized. This means that extensive work may be wasted, which discourages researchers to embark on this endeavor. Another limitation of phenomenology is that the researcher is dependent on the interpretations and insights of the informant. This may limit the generalizability of results and put into question the objective "truth" of any conclusions drawn. As the concept of "truth" is situationally driven and personally constructed in existential approaches that ground the phenomenological study of event experiences and meanings, it would perhaps be better for researchers to try revealing issues and interrelationships that add new insights to phenomena under study rather than drawing absolute conclusions.

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