

The Objectification of Woman in the Phenomenological Study

Beljun P. Enaya¹

Visayas State University

beljun.enaya@vsu.edu.ph

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3506-1252>

Abstract

Phenomenological method seeks to understand or interpret the experience of an existent being. In the case of this paper, I pose a question on the search for the essence of being a woman using a phenomenological method: How does finding the essence of a woman using a phenomenological method become an objectification of such a creature? When one looks at the woman as a phenomenon, one tends to objectify the very being of a woman. There is a so-called phenomenological objectification of the woman as an object of study. This paper criticizes the way phenomenological method deduces woman study into an objectified entity. It does not disregard the contribution of phenomenological studies to the understanding of being a woman. However, every time a woman is defined, she is deduced into something else other than what she wills to become. As a critique, this paper argues the implication of emphasizing the phenomenological method in finding the essence of a woman. Furthermore, it offers a different way of understanding a woman without any prejudices. The starting point of understanding proceeds from the fact of the very being of a human being who is free and equal with other human beings. That starting point is a result of the critique of phenomenological reduction of a woman as such. Thus, this paper contests the phenomenological result of the study of a woman that leads to the objectification of a particular human person.

Keywords: woman, objectification, phenomenological study, human person

Introduction

The phenomenological approach is said to be a reaction to the positivist view of reality. The positivist and empirical studies tend to neglect the social and subjective factors in understanding a particular phenomenon or a reality. "Phenomenology is a rigorous science in the sense of a coherent system of propositions; it goes beyond positive science by aiming at absolute certainty for its foundations and at freedom from presuppositions that have not

¹ Asst. Professor Beljun P. Enaya teaches at the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Visayas State University. His research interests include ethics, political philosophy, existentialism, philosophy of education, and philosophy of agriculture.



passed phenomenological scrutiny (Spiegelberg, 1981, p. 51).” Positivist science focuses on the objectivity of the given reality. However, phenomenology opposes the positive approach because the latter restricts the givenness to particular experience only and rejects the chance of comprehending general essences and relations. For Edmund Husserl, “the positivists are prejudiced in not accepting anything other than particular data, and especially sense-data (Sinha, 1963, p. 563).” Thus, a phenomenological method provides an alternative way of investigating a given reality.

The rise of phenomenological research contributes to understanding certain phenomena and dealing with matters that concern a particular situation or people. The study of experiences makes way to a fuller grasp of the dynamics of the people. The aim of arriving at a universal or commonality of experiences as lived by selected participants provides a conclusive understanding of the reality at hand. In this case, phenomenological studies about women give rise to new perspectives in dealing with women, such as in the feminist movement, regardless if it is politically motivated or not.

The phenomenological method is without a doubt a valuable tool in research because it helps certain decisions and policies to attune with the given fact. However, in finding the essence of a woman via her experiences, the results may show stereotyping and, thus, categorizing women in one way or another. This is why this paper seeks to argue that phenomenological studies of women tend to be more objectifying women than emphasizing their subjectivity and freedom of becoming someone other than what has been said in the results of phenomenological studies.

It is important to note that the plight of a woman in being recognized as a subject and co-equal with men is still a principle in many situations rather than a practice. For instance, the situation in the Philippines where President Duterte easily cracks jokes about women without minding if women are offended shows that women are oppressed. In fact, he said that his daughter, Sara Duterte, is not suitable to become a president because the presidency is not for women (Reuters, 2021). Such a note is a manifestation of obvious discrimination and objectification against women (and other genders). Llanera (2016) called this Duterte’s style a militant machismo. Even during the pandemic, the privilege of being a man becomes more evident when, in the context of academia, “men submitted many more manuscripts” than women (Flaherty, 2020). In these examples of inequalities, it is justified to have more research in women phenomenology. The Gender and Development Program (GAD) in the Philippines is an initiative of empowering women and providing avenues for more opportunities or research concerning gender or, in this case, women. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper is not so much on empowering women, but it only hopes to give such implications.

In aiming to gain a more concrete grasp about women, phenomenological research has various types of methods to employ. Allen-Collinson (2013) provides three kinds of phenomenological methods: 1) Transcendental or constitutive phenomenology, which is grounded in Husserl’s philosophy and refers to a “descriptive, utilizing the techniques of

epoche and reduction to suspend or bracket the natural attitude . . . in order to arrive at its essences”; 2) hermeneutic phenomenology which “focuses upon the context, intention and meaning surrounding a text or representation,” and thus it emphasizes the interpretive; 3) existentialist phenomenology which originates from Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and highlights the human existential unity with the flesh of the world or the embodiment (pp. 300-301). These different phenomenological methods are applied in different fields of research, such as philosophy, sociology, medicine, psychology, and other hardcore sciences. When a woman becomes the object of the study, the objectification begins indirectly. This objectification is a reason for the argument of this paper.

The central position of this paper is to argue that, in the process of studying a woman through a phenomenological method in order to get the essence of a woman, the woman is being objectified rather than implicating the subjectivity. It shall explain how finding the essence of a woman using a phenomenological method becomes an objectification. In other words, it is a critique of the phenomenological method in studying women. It then provides an alternative way of understanding the phenomenon of a woman.

Objectification of a Woman

The purpose of phenomenology is “to provide descriptions of the essence of experience as lived by, starting any inquiry with a mindset that is ideally free of previous thoughts about that experience (Sharma-Brymer & Fox, 2008, p. 321).” In the case of understanding a woman, certain experiences are investigated and interpreted to draw some conclusions. A phenomenological approach usually suggests to directly gather information from women, and most of the time, the instrument for collecting data is by interviewing or subjecting the participants to a focused group discussion. The narratives of the women participants are analyzed further to understand the meaning of utterances in connection to their experiences. With simple to complicated processes, the researcher may go over the data and verify it until a conclusion is drawn.

It is not the intention of the phenomenological method to objectify a woman in the process of the study. However, the results of the phenomenological studies imply an objectification of a woman as such. Let’s take a look at the case study on “Being an educated woman in India.” The aim of the study is to understand what an educated woman is. Of course, in that study, it does not only focus on being a woman as such but also as educated. A hermeneutical phenomenology is employed to grasp the text in the interview. With the method, the study seeks to find “the essence of ‘being an educated woman,’ creating a pedagogical ‘understanding’ of the essential nature of the shared experience as lived by the women participants of this research study (2008, p. 321).” The result of the study provides different themes and suggests a new way of understanding women beyond the existing notion.

It cannot be denied that the unannounced purpose of the study is to get the new concept of women in general. The thematic organization from the narratives do not assure that a woman as an individual being is different from other women in her own experience. I am aware that the researchers are conscious of the fact that the themes do not exactly represent all women participants. However, by doing thematic analysis, generalization can be drawn from the data, but it only transgresses the mere fact that a woman's experience is the same and equal with other women. The initial step of objectifying a woman emerges from the generalization of the experiences of women. Objectification is the process of providing the givenness made by an external subject to fit in a definite purpose. An outsider's perception of the experiences of a woman cannot be deduced as a woman's essence or a woman's path to be understood. The noble contribution of the case herein is the provision of data of experiences, and most importantly, the recommendation that the needs are "more research studies on narratives and use of qualitative research to interpret experiences lived in particular socio-cultural structures (p. 331)." The recommendation entails that a conception of a woman through her experiences cannot be quickly universalizable. Hence, the limitation of participants cannot give a definite and conclusive understanding of a woman as such but can only provide an initial understanding of a particular woman but not a woman as a universal being. Similarly, Marie Berg and Karin Dahlberg (1998) find out that "although the interviewed women are not representative of all women with such an experience, there are some lessons which can be learnt from the findings (p.27)."

In the guise of understanding the woman's experience, a certain hidden presupposition emerges along the process of phenomenological study. The attempt of defining the woman experience is tantamount to giving an objective description of what a woman is. The so-called descriptive elements in a woman's experience allow further objectification because the description is suggestive to apply it to other women with "similar" situations. However, there can be no the same or identical situation for all women. There can only be a situation and the subject, such as a woman, who perceives the givenness of the moment. This part is not to claim that a woman has no shared experiences with other women. However, the emphasis is on describing certain experiences of a woman, and that description further objectifies the woman when it is simply applied to another woman. In other words, objectification emerges the moment an external subject considers the descriptive narratives as objective bases for capturing the essence of a woman.

I have no objection to the investigation of the lived experiences of women. However, when the use of lived experiences is given much more weight to prove something, then there is already a limiting concretization of the reality of a woman. For instance, in studying the phenomenon of a woman leadership, Claire O'Neill (2019) has collected data from 11 women who claim to be women and leaders. She finds out that the women tend to self-objectify themselves. Objectification in the process of phenomenologizing is when the researcher conceptualizes a certain woman. When one answers what a woman is, then he or she is implicitly objectify a woman by virtue of conceptualization. Natalie Stoljar (1995) argues that



“an answer to the question of whether there is a universal ‘woman’ does not answer the further question of whether womanness is essential to individual identity (p. 288).” Hence, a phenomenological study that tends to conceptualize a woman's identity is an objectification of a woman as such.

The results of the phenomenological studies tend to contribute to the mere categorization and conceptualization of a woman in society. Most phenomenological researches delve into the outward expressions, or the role of the women in a given context. The problem lies in the implication brought by the phenomenological analysis when the results of the study produce generalization and definite conception of a woman from which it risks to become applicable to other women’s personal lived experience.

The Alternative

It is being recognized in this paper that the phenomenological method impacts the understanding of a woman’s world. Particular lived experiences contribute to giving a new perspective in dealing with a particular group of women. One significant contribution of phenomenological studies is the creation of policies in treating women. However, I argue that the implications and contributions still do not capture the essence of a woman. Phenomenological studies may provide underpinnings concerning the understanding of a woman per se, but they cannot give a conclusive essence of a woman (Tuffour, 2017).

Like studying the counterpart of a woman, phenomenological study on a man will result in a mere assumption of what a man should be. In that way, both phenomenological findings on either man or woman will only cause more damage to the equality and fairness from which political or practical application envisions to happen in actual life situations. Thus, whether I propose to do away with the phenomenological method or not is yet to be seen.

As of this point, there might be contentions that I may not have considered the fact that phenomenological studies deal with the phenomenon and thus, they are concerned with what appears to the consciousness. Furthermore, the consideration that phenomenology of a woman is based on the subjective perception of the woman being studied does not warrant the lack of objectification. On the contrary, putting the phenomenon of a woman into the researcher's consciousness initiates the objectification. “Being perceived” is an act of objectification. Of course, the whole woman is not necessarily perceived as such because phenomenological studies would claim only the tidbits of the experiences of the woman. However, as mentioned above, the tendency to claim that these particular essences constitute a woman serves the act of objectification of any woman who seems to have a similar description as claimed by the result of the studies.

I argue that the findings, results, and implications put forward by the phenomenological studies bring more inequalities or divisions among the conception of a

woman. By the time that the researcher concludes from their phenomenological approach, they contribute to another objectified identity of the woman. In usual cases, there are only indirect results of objectification because, with ethical concerns, the researcher would never intend to objectify a woman. However, adding more notions to the inequalities, stereotyping, or unjust objectification of women is strongly discouraged. In this sense, proposing an alternative approach may lessen or avoid the implicative addition to the struggles among women.

Focusing on the idea of a human person would give more unprejudiced notions between man and woman. Phenomenology of the human person helps more in understanding the human being as such. In this way, any researcher can avoid implicating the woman as unequal with men or another kind of being. The contention that all human beings are equal and free eliminates the division between man and woman. This approach does not undermine the uniqueness of individual human beings, e.g., the phenomenon of man and woman. However, approaching the humanness of a woman enriches the idea of what a human being is and how they must be treated.

Finding the essences of being a woman or a man is an infinite regress. Phenomenological studies need to study all women, and that means throughout the end of time. It is impossible to get a conclusive essence of either a woman and a man. The approach to studying a woman must rest on the freedom of a woman to fulfill or realize for herself her uniqueness. Phenomenological studies sometimes presume that women share the same identity or universal concept as per conceived phenomena. However, no phenomenological studies can prove that.

A human being is free, in the same way a woman is. The givenness of the facticity or situation being dealt with by a woman enriches her capacity for freedom. The freedom here does not refer to political freedom because the latter is a privileged position of giving freedom to a woman. That is not supposed to be the case because a woman is freedom as such in the same way the man is freedom. Is this contention a homogenous understanding of man and woman? It is on the level of phenomenological and ontological understanding of the human person, but it is not in as much as the woman or man is a becoming-being. In other words, being a woman does not confine herself with the phenomenological implications. The particular situatedness of a woman presumes her facticity of becoming but not of being a definite entity.

A woman has no definite meaning like a man. She creates her own meaning. Instead of interpreting the meaning of her experiences by the phenomenological researcher, the researcher should make the woman's perception of herself as such without doing a lengthy analytical discussion that only deduces the woman to mere phenomenon. The mechanism used by the phenomenological studies is framed for a woman to provide data-experience, and then she is also defined according to the mechanism of the framework. That is clearly an objectification of a woman. Framing a mechanism and is imposed on a woman's experiences

to give a broad understanding of woman precludes the subjectivity of the woman. That is the reason why concentrating on the phenomenon of the essence of a woman contributes to injury rather than empowering women.

At this juncture, it is noteworthy that the critique of phenomenological studies and their contribution to the understanding of women does not enter into ethical judgment. It is not to say that objectification is an ethical problem because it leads to saying that doing phenomenological study is unethical. The point being made so far is that objectification is a process of putting the essence of a woman as a reality apart from the subjectivity and being-freedom of a woman. There is no denial here for the ethical implications and even political implications, because the process of objectification in phenomenological studies can be oppressive if taken as an authoritative source of woman concept. However, the proposal is to focus more on the phenomenology of human beings that includes both man and woman. In this way, positions that add only to the conflict between man and woman can be eliminated without the prejudice of both parties.

The proposal is to shift the focus on the ontology of being rather than the dichotomy of man and woman. Although Simone de Beauvoir tries to answer the distinction of a woman, it must also be noted that she also shifts her focus on the “fundamental ontological inquiries into the meaning of being (Heinämaa, 1999, p. 122).” Phenomenology can be a helpful tool in understanding human reality, but focusing on either a woman’s or man’s essence increases the unequal distribution of perceptive meanings.

Conclusion

The critique of phenomenological studies on women argues only on the objectification of the study in the process and result of the studies. The importance of phenomenological studies cannot be outrightly rejected but must be cautious in focusing on the essences of a woman. With this, a shift in focus must be preferred to avoid objectifying results and implications. Understanding the phenomenon of the human being needs to be more emphasized, and the result of phenomenological finding on the essence of a woman must be viewed in the process of becoming rather than being categorized as such. Hence, the freedom of a woman as an ontological understanding can contribute more to the problem of equality.

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