

Meta-Reflection on an Applied Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Methodological Challenges of a Study on Young-Women's Political Participation

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Abstract: In this article, we present a meta-reflection on the following questions: What methodological challenges arise when using VAN MANEN's (1990, 2014) applied hermeneutic phenomenology in a study of young-women's political participation? How can its analysis contribute to a critical reflection on this methodology in the human sciences? We present methodological challenges regarding delimiting the phenomenon, defining the research question, selecting participants, collecting data, conducting thematic analysis and working with a diverse team. We conclude that these challenges are transferable to other empirical phenomenological research, and that researcher reflexivity is key to facing them.

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1. Introduction

This article arose from the experience of conducting a phenomenological-hermeneutic study on the political participation of young-women, and it presents a methodological meta-reflection, understood as an inquiry into research processes (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1994). This type of inquiry allowed for the identification of limitations, biases, and potentialities in the development of qualitative studies as well as an awareness of the implications of each decision. In this meta-reflective process we focused on analyzing the challenges that emerged when applying the approach to the study of our phenomenon, the political participation of young-women. The analysis was not limited to technical or instrumental aspects but is part of a broader concern on hermeneutic phenomenology: The effort to maintain an empathetic, ethical and open attitude towards lived experience, without it being overshadowed by the research team's prior or projective interpretations. At the same time, we recognize the need to build knowledge that, while faithful to the uniqueness of lived experience, can provide conceptual or methodological elements transferable to other contexts. Within this framework lie the research questions guiding this work: What methodological challenges arise when applying hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of young-women's political participation? And how can its analysis contribute to a critical reflection on this methodology in the human sciences? [1]

Starting from the guiding questions, the paper is organized into the following sections: First, we outline the phenomenological perspectives that informed our study (Section 2). Next, we introduce the meta-reflection approach adopted in the present article (Section 3). We then present the methodological challenges encountered during our applied hermeneutic phenomenological research on the political participation of young women (Section 4). The first challenge involved delimiting the phenomenon: Political participation of young-women¹. The second was formulating the research question. The third concerned the selection of participants. The fourth related to the collection of lived experience descriptions. The fifth concerned conducting the thematic analysis. Additionally, we faced a transversal challenge: Managing the complexity of a diverse group. We conclude with a summary of key reflections and findings (Section 5). [2]

1 We use the hyphenated "young-woman" to emphasize the intersection between being a woman and being young.

2. Our Phenomenological Perspectives

We followed VAN MANEN's applied hermeneutic phenomenology (1990, 2014). He proposed that researchers should maintain a *pedagogical relationship* with the phenomenon they are investigating, a relationship that implies an ethical commitment and an openness to learning (1990). Aware of the importance of this perspective, we aimed to integrate this relationship with our phenomenon: Political participation as a young-woman. Beyond his pedagogical orientation, to better understand VAN MANEN's approach, it is necessary to consider its roots in the phenomenological tradition. [3]

Phenomenology, a term that comes from the Greek *φαινόμενον* [phenomenon] and means the study of *that which appears or is seen*, sought to unveil the essence of conscious experiences, *going to the things themselves*, as its main exponent, HUSSERL (1970 [1954]) put it. HUSSERL developed two fundamental branches: Transcendental phenomenology and eidetic phenomenology. The former is used to focus on analyzing pure consciousness as the condition for the possibility for all experience. And in the practice of the latter, one seeks to identify essences—meaning structures—that allow an experience to be recognized as such, beyond its empirical variations. However, these essences should not be understood as independent realities or objective foundations of phenomena. As RICOEUR (1967) clarified, for HUSSERL essences were configurations of meaning that emerged through imaginative variation, guided by intentional consciousness. Similarly, LEVINAS (2017 [1938]) pointed out that phenomenological intuition was not a simple passive reception of the object, but an act through which consciousness actively constituted that which appears. Thus, both eidetic and transcendental phenomenology share the same orientation: Understanding how the meaning of experience is constituted in and from consciousness. Both perspectives are complementary for unveiling the structure of experience, but with different approaches: Eidetic phenomenology is focused on essences; transcendental phenomenology, in its more specific sense, is addressed at the structure of pure consciousness, the transcendental subject that makes experience possible (BEYER, 2022). [4]

Thus, for HUSSERL (1970 [1954]) consciousness was what makes experience of the world possible: Consciousness was always consciousness of something; that is, it had an inherent intentionality. As ARNOLD (2020) pointed out, HUSSERL's phenomenology was, to a large extent, a theory of intentionality, and intentionality was the property of being about an object or being directed to an object. All acts of perceiving, valuing, judging refer to objects; anything one can talk about meaningfully was, in a sense, an object. [5]

Deepening this relationship between consciousness and the world, HEIDEGGER, a disciple of HUSSERL, made important contributions to phenomenology. His main idea was centered on the analysis of *Dasein*, the being-there, the human beings who were thrown into the world and were characterized by their temporal existence and their understanding of being, and who were the only entity who asked themselves about being. For HEIDEGGER (1997 [1927]), phenomenology

was the method for accessing the meaning of being and understanding human existence in its totality. In this approach—which, according to VAN MANEN (2014), was that of ontological phenomenology— HEIDEGGER (1997 [1927]) also emphasized the importance of interpretation and understanding in phenomenological research. [6]

MERLEAU-PONTY (1962 [1945]), influenced by HUSSERL and HEIDEGGER, developed a view of phenomenology in which the embodiment of consciousness was highlighted; that is, he argued that the body was not just a vehicle that transports humans, but was the very basis of the human experience in the world. He questioned HUSSERL's transcendental reduction and proposed that consciousness was always situated in a body that interacts with the world. It could be said that this is similar to HEIDEGGER's (1997 [1927]) notion of *being-in-the-world*; however, for MERLEAU-PONTY, corporeity occupied a distinctive place. For MERLEAU-PONTY (1962 [1945]), lived experience, accessible through descriptive phenomenology, was fundamental to understanding the structure of experience. Essences manifested themselves in the interaction of the body with the world. The body was not just another object, but the condition for the possibility of experience. MERLEAU-PONTY sought to overcome HUSSERL's subject-object dualism². Perception was an encounter between body and world where both were co-constituted (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962 [1945]). Phenomenology became an exploration of the interrelationship between subject and world, where both shape each other. [7]

Although this brief overview of the phenomenological tradition—from HUSSERL to MERLEAU-PONTY—provided us with a solid philosophical framework for thinking about experience, it also presented a classic challenge in the human sciences: The transition from classical phenomenology to phenomenology in the human sciences (FINLAY, 2009; VAN MANEN, 1990, 2014). To address this, we turned to the proposals of VAN MANEN, who developed his methodological approach in dialogue with various phenomenological traditions, not as a mere appropriation of concepts, but as an interpretative exercise that translates and reconfigures certain philosophical intuitions into the field of research in the human sciences. In this sense, he drew on HUSSERL's idea of the intentionality of consciousness—characteristic of transcendental phenomenology—and the importance of phenomenological description (descriptive phenomenology) to unveil the essences of lived experience. From HEIDEGGER, he took the notion of being-in-the-world and the importance of interpretative understanding to access the meaning of being (interpretative and ontological phenomenology). From MERLEAU-PONTY, he incorporated the idea of the body as a mediator of experience (VAN MANEN, 2014). However, as FINLAY (2009) or VAN MANEN himself (1990, 2014) have pointed out, this *translation* was fraught with multiple tensions: Between the descriptive and the interpretative, between the ideal of a pre-reflective experience and the concrete conditions of language, the body, and

2 It is important to note that the claim that MERLEAU-PONTY overcomes HUSSERL's subject-object dualism is subject to debate. Some scholars, such as ZAHAVI (2003), argue that HUSSERL, through his concepts of *noesis* and *noema*, had already attempted to dissolve this dualism.

the social world in which that experience is narrated. Nevertheless, these tensions—far from invalidating this *translation*—enrich the proposal, as they compel researchers to position themselves critically and to exercise constant reflexivity. FINLAY (2009) suggested understanding phenomenological research not as the mechanical application of a method, but as an artisanal and dialogical practice in which rigor was built from ethical sensitivity and phenomenological openness. In this sense, VAN MANEN (1990, 2014) understood applied phenomenology as a reflective art in which one endeavored to approach lived experience without losing sight of the complexity of the act of knowing. Likewise, VAN MANEN (1990) proposed maintaining a *pedagogical relationship* with the phenomenon one investigates, a relationship that implies an ethical commitment and an openness to learning. [8]

VAN MANEN thus proposed a hermeneutic phenomenology in which description was integrated with the understanding of concrete existence, as researchers sought to understand the meaning of lived experience. For him, phenomenology was an interpretative research endeavor to *return to things themselves* and to unveil their meaning and essence. In this *going back*, the starting point was lived experience, as lived through in daily life, and reflection played a fundamental role. Researchers must reflect on their own accounts, on those of the participants and on the phenomenon itself. [9]

According to VAN MANEN, there are two philosophical methods which should be followed in this reflective process: *Epoché* and *reductio*. The first consisted of consciously and rigorously suspending preconceptions, theoretical frameworks, and prior judgments, with the aim of allowing the experience to show itself as it was, in its lived immediacy. The second—the reduction—allowed for isolating the essential structures of the phenomenon, that is, what remains constant beyond its multiple empirical variations. However, transferring these procedures to the field of human sciences involves a series of conceptual transformations. While in the framework of transcendental phenomenology these operations have a philosophical scope, in hermeneutic phenomenology they are reinterpreted as situated reflective tools. In this context, the *epoché* does not imply an abstraction *outside the world*, but rather a deliberate exercise of critical distancing from one's own prior interpretations. As VAN MANEN (2014) suggested, this suspension did not imply decontextualizing but examining how the researcher's position affected the understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, rather than literally applying Husserlian methods, it was a matter of rereading, or *translating*. From this perspective, *returning to the experience* did not mean recovering a supposed original purity, but approaching its constitutive density, as a lived phenomenon, in order to make its structures of meaning visible. [10]

Also, VAN MANEN explored concrete existence through the existentials: Lived body, lived space, lived relationships, lived time, and lived things. According to GUKELBERGER and MEYER (2021), those can be understood also in relation to SCHÜTZ's (1945, as cited in GUKELBERGER & MEYER, 2021, §5) provinces of meaning: The lived time encompassed a specific time-perspective; lived relationships, a specific form of sociality; lived body, a specific form of

experiencing one's corporeity; lived space and things, a specific form of spontaneity/accessing of the outer world. GUKELBERGER and MEYER referred to the pre-reflexive lived experience as a *specific epoché*, and spoke of "a specific tension of consciousness, meaning a way in which the ego's consciousness is directed towards what one experiences" (2021, §9). [11]

Although to a lesser extent, VAN MANEN (1990) also considered reflection on the conditions for the possibility of experience. Thus, the eidetic perspective (the search for the essence) was always in dialogue with the existential perspective. It was not a matter of separating essence from existence, but of understanding how essence manifested itself in concrete existence: The universal was in the concrete. [12]

For conducting phenomenology in the human sciences, VAN MANEN (1990, 2004) proposed a series of phenomenological structures of research: 1. investigating experiences as they are lived through; 2. reflecting on their essential aspects; 3. describing them with sensitivity; 4. maintaining a pedagogical relationship with the phenomenon; and 5. attending to the research context, considering both the parts and the whole. Writing, for VAN MANEN (1990, 2004), played a crucial role in this process, not only to keep records of results, but as a means of reflecting on experiences and unveiling their meaning. [13]

3. Approach to the Meta-Reflection

This article is a meta-reflection based on the analysis of documents generated during the original research on the political participation of young-women, following VAN MANEN (see Table 1):

<p><i>Research question:</i> What is the lived experience of political participation as a young-woman? Or, expressed differently, what are the meaning structures underlying the political participation experience of young-women?</p> <p><i>Method:</i> Applied hermeneutic phenomenology</p> <p><i>General objective:</i> To account for the lived experience of political participation as a young-woman</p> <p><i>Participants:</i> 15 young-women aged 18 to 35 with intense experiences in political participation</p> <p><i>Sampling:</i> A type of sampling oriented to the phenomenological density of the stories was used, prioritizing the narrative richness and experiential resonance in the expression of the experiences (see Section 4.3)³</p> <p><i>Fieldwork:</i></p> <p>First stage: Collection of lived experience descriptions (LEDs)</p> <p>Second stage: Reflection on the identified LEDs</p> <p>Data collection⁴ (empirical methods): 15 written accounts (13 LEDs and 2 anecdotes), 5 phenomenological and hermeneutic interviews, and the main researcher's (FOLGUEIRAS-BERTOMEU) epistemological journal</p> <p>Data analysis (reflective methods): Thematic analysis</p> <p>Findings: Structures of meaning of political participation as a young-woman</p>

Table 1: Base study for meta-reflection⁵ [14]

3 This strategy is based on the phenomenological orientations of MOUSTAKAS (1994) and VAN MANEN (1990, 2014) who proposed that the selection of participants should mainly attend to the descriptive density and the possibility of revealing meaning structures from the accounts.

4 It is worth noting, as said by WILLATT (2024), that from a phenomenological perspective, oral and written records are not understood as data in a positivist sense, that is, as objective or supposedly accurate representations of reality. Each collected piece of data is rather a datum: Something that is given to us or granted in our experience. The description of what is given in the experience is never identical to the lived experience (VAN MANEN, 1990). In that irreducible difference between the lived experience and its description or explanation lies the possibility of all phenomenology.

5 The base study for the meta-reflection in this article is further explained on the website <https://parjovid.wixsite.com/cas2019> [Accessed: April 26, 2025].

3.1 Objectives of the meta-reflection

3.1.1 General objectives

The general objective of the meta-reflection is to analyze the methodological challenges that emerge when applying hermeneutic phenomenology in an empirical study of young-women's political participation, in order to contribute to the reflection on this methodology in the context of the human sciences. [15]

3.1.2 Specific objectives

The specific objectives of the meta-reflection are:

- To identify and describe the specific methodological challenges that arise when applying hermeneutic phenomenology in a study on political participation as a young-woman;
- To reflect on the implications of the methodological decisions made during the research;
- To propose recommendations for future research that seeks to apply hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of complex social phenomena, based on the lessons learned in this study. [16]

3.2 Data collection and sources of information

The data collection techniques⁶ for the meta-reflection are:

- Development of epistemological journals by the researchers: The team wrote reflective records on the research process, methodological decisions, difficulties encountered, and lessons learned.
- Reflection meetings of the research team: Group sessions were held to engage in critical discussions regarding the research design, data collection, data analysis, and emerging methodological dilemmas.
- Writing of accounts by the researchers: The team wrote anecdotes describing the experiences of participation and of being a woman. [17]

The sources of information used are:

- The outputs generated from the techniques mentioned above (epistemological journals, written accounts, and meeting records and summaries);
- Working documents: 12 partial reports, formal records documenting the progress, adjustments, and insights gained throughout the research process. [18]

⁶ We translated all quotations from the collected data into English.

3.3 Analysis techniques

The data analysis technique was focused on examining how the reflection of our own practice influenced methodological decisions, data interpretation, and knowledge construction (ALVESSON & SKÖLDBERG, 2017)⁷. During the reflective process, four phases coexisted: Initial thematic coding, critical examination of positionalities, triangulation among sources, and the emergent construction of interpretative categories. [19]

First, we conducted thematic coding of the generated sources of information (epistemological journals, written accounts of experience, meeting records and summaries, and working documents), identifying recurring issues related to methodological decisions, epistemological tensions, and learning outcomes. Through the coding process, we identified themes such as the difficulty in delimiting the phenomenon of political participation as a young-woman and debates regarding how to appropriately formulate the research question, among others. In parallel, we carried out a critical examination of positionalities, analyzing how our theoretical, epistemological, and personal perspectives influenced the ways we addressed the challenges that arose during the research process. [20]

By triangulating the sources, we compared and enriched the identified themes, validating them through different perspectives and records. For example, the difficulty in collecting dense and pre-reflective descriptions of participation experiences was identified in the epistemological journals, group meetings, and working documents. [21]

Finally, through a reflective and non-linear process, we gradually organized the themes and learning outcomes into broader interpretative categories. These categories were not established *a priori* but rather emerged progressively as the collective reflection and critical analysis of the sources of information advanced. The interpretative categories correspond to the main methodological challenges identified throughout the research process, which are discussed in detail in the results sections of this article. [22]

7 ALVESSON and SKÖLDBERG (2017) served more as a broad conceptual support for the idea of reflection in research than as a methodological guide for the specific stages of analysis described in this section, as they focused primarily on epistemology and critical reflexivity in qualitative research.

4. Our Phenomenological Path: Methodological Challenges in Research on Political Participation of Young-Women

In the study which served as the basis for the present meta-reflection, we delved into the political participation of young-women from the perspective, mainly, of VAN MANEN's (1990, 2014) applied hermeneutic phenomenology. We focused on understanding the lived experience of the young-women themselves, trying to avoid preconceptions or rigid theoretical frameworks. [23]

In this phenomenological path, we have faced several methodological challenges that have shaped our research process. To systematize these challenges, we rely on the reflections that emerged in our research meetings and on the epistemological journals written by the researchers. In fact, this journal has been a fundamental tool to identify, analyze and reflect on the different challenges, and to encourage individual reflection on our own practice and understanding of phenomenology, as expressed in one of the entries:

"I am beginning to be aware that advancement in phenomenology requires constant questioning of our own practice and the meaning we give to phenomenology. I think it is essential to cultivate individual reflection—in addition to collective spaces—that pushes us to ask questions, even if they sometimes lack immediate answers. Writing, rewriting, and reading about phenomenology, especially classical authors, are key to immersing oneself in this perspective" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, February 2, 2021). [24]

4.1 Methodological Challenge 1. Delimiting the phenomenon: Political participation as a young-woman

In order to delimit the phenomenon, the most relevant thing was to understand that in phenomenology it does not matter, *a priori*, what each member of the team understands by *political participation as a young-woman*, nor all the theories or perspectives written on the subject. Since phenomenology implies a return to the essential, we had to return to the *essence* of the concept of political participation. To do so, we tried to initially apply *epoché* in the most radical sense of HUSSERL (1970 [1954]): *Bracketing* all presuppositions about the existence of the world and of objects in order to access the pure experience of consciousness. However, we soon realized that this approach, while fundamental in transcendental phenomenology, was difficult for us to apply in practice. Our lack of experience with radical *epoché*, coupled with the disbelief of most of the team that this was possible, prevented us from moving forward with the work. Questions arose for us such as:

"... but if we delimit absolutely nothing of the phenomenon, what are we investigating? How can we even begin to talk about this phenomenon without any reference point? And, if we delimit only some of the phenomenon, are we no longer doing *epoché*?" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, September 15, 2020) [25]

Therefore, we opted for a more flexible *epoché*, in line with VAN MANEN's (1990, 2014) hermeneutic phenomenology. Conducting this approach allowed us to recognize and question our own preconceptions, *cleaning* the concept of political participation of prejudices and pre-established theoretical frameworks. [26]

To carry out this conceptual *cleansing*, we resorted to different strategies:

- Reflection through writing: We elaborated written accounts about our own experiences of political participation (FOLGUEIRAS-BERTOMEU, DE-ORMAECHEA-OTALORA, SALVÀ-AIGE & COMET-DONOSO, 2021), which helped us to become aware of our preconceptions and to question them.
- Review of phenomenological studies: We reviewed the phenomenologies of participation of ASHWORTH (1997) and HUSSERL (in ESTADA-MORA, 2007) and the phenomenology of politics of ARENDT (1958, and in VAN MANEN, 2014). We considered that these studies, by focusing on lived experience, offered us a perspective more akin to our search for the essence of the concept.
- Revision of the etymology: We revised the words *participation* and *politic*, seeking to recover their original meaning and to be able to remove the connotations acquired over time and in our context. [27]

Through this process, we defined political participation for our study as *that/those activity/ies of the citizens when they participate collectively in public affairs that seek the common good* (FOLGUEIRAS-BERTOMEU & SANDÍN-ESTEBAN, 2023). In debating and constructing the definition of political participation, a new debate opened for us, regarding whether the fact that *being young* and *being a woman* were inseparable parts of the experience of political participation. We concluded that these were not mere details, but dimensions that completely change how this political participation is lived and understood. They constitute the very essence of our phenomenon, conditioning how it is experienced and signified. In phenomenological terms, being young and being a woman would not be contingent aspects to be *put in parentheses* (*epoché*) but would constitute essential dimensions of the studied phenomenon. This methodological decision is in line with eidetic phenomenology which seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by including everything that makes it unique. In our case, the essence of young-women's political participation includes precisely being a young-woman. It also relates to existential phenomenology which emphasizes the concrete situation of the human being in the world and in this case, the situation of being a young-woman is fundamental to understanding our phenomenon of study.

"Today we have had a debate about whether political participation being a young-woman has *something of its own*, with just political participation being ... *something else*. This debate is not minor, and I remember a question about another study that I once asked Raquel⁸, *Raquel, is this research phenomenon correct: The lived experience of being a woman-university-student?*. She answered something like, *It's fine, as long as you think that being a woman-university-student has something of its*

8 See e.g., AYALA-CARABAJA (2008) for additional information.

own rather than simply being a woman, for example, something that a woman does not have. If the answer is yes, the phenomenon is correct; if the answer is *you don't know*, you should think more about it; if the answer is no, maybe you are contaminating yourself by the fact that as a university professor, you have easy access to young women" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, May 11, 2022). [28]

Although *being a woman* and *being young* constitute fundamental existential dimensions that shape the experience of political participation and are a constitutive part of the phenomenon, we did not review them in the same sense as political participation. Honestly, at that point of the study, this decision stemmed from a lack of clarity about how to approach these dimensions *a priori*, in the framework of our phenomenological study that later marked a turning point in the research. [29]

4.2 Methodological Challenge 2. The research question

Formulating the research question has been one of the most important challenges, although it always poses difficulties in any qualitative study (DE LA CUESTA-BENJUMEA, 2006; SANDÍN, 2003). In phenomenology, this complexity is accentuated because the question greatly conditions the phenomenological approach:

"Today, during the meeting, we had different positionings on how to formulate the research question. We debated between *What is the lived experience of political participation as a young-woman?* and *How is the lived experience of political participation as a young-woman?* We got stuck on whether one question is more descriptive and the other more processual. We cannot agree on how to perceive the *how*. We tend to go immediately to what the processes of political participation as a young-woman are like. However, from a phenomenological perspective, asking *how is participation ...* could lead us to the description of the experience with its multiple nuances and manifestations, while the *what* already directs us towards the search for the essence of the experience" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, January 18, 2021). [30]

Another debate arose when we considered whether the wording of the question should include the type of participation space (mixed or non-mixed, in terms of gender).

"Today we have been talking all day about whether mixed or non-mixed participation spaces. We are sure that this conditions the lived experience (or it may be just our prejudices ...); as far as the *epoché* goes, I must question even what is a given, or perhaps, is it not a given? Would this be the case: How does the structure of the spatiality of consciousness influence the way young-women experience the spaces of political participation? Or would it rather be: How does the structure of the spatiality of consciousness influence my own way of conceiving the spaces of political participation?" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, March 21, 2021) [31]

Without realizing it, with these debates we were questioning ourselves about issues more proper to transcendental phenomenology. Although our work was not centered on this perspective, we are sure that our own structures of possibility of consciousness have conditioned us. [32]

Our research question ended up being: What is the lived experience of political participation as a young-woman (FOLGUEIRAS-BERTOMEU & SANDÍN-ESTEBAN, 2023)? Formulated in another way: What is the nature, the sense, the meaning, the singularity or the particularity of the lived experience of political participation as a young-woman? What are the structures of meaning of the lived experience of political participation as a young-woman? Following VAN MANEN (1990), we started from the intention of describing the lived experience itself (pre-reflexive knowledge) to arrive at the meaning structures of the phenomenon through interpretation and reflection (reflective perception). [33]

4.3 Methodological Challenge 3. Participant selection

The selection of participants for our study presented unexpected challenges. Although it was clear to us that the participants had to be women with experiences of political participation, the prior delimitation of the phenomenon and the application of the *epoché* were not easy. [34]

Initially, to access the sample, we delimited *being young* to an age range of 18 to 35 years, something we would not do today. The focus of our study was not youth as a chronological stage, but *being young* as a way of experiencing the world and participating politically. Therefore, the stories and anecdotes from women in their 50s about experiences from their youth can be as relevant as those of younger women, as long as those accounts reflect the essence of *being young* in political participation⁹. As explained by AYALA-CARABAJÓ in a training she offered our group¹⁰, what defines the relevance of an account is the richness and vividness of the memory, not the fact that it is old or recent. As for *being a woman*, we initially contemplated it as a duality of *being a man* or *being a woman*. This simplification generated difficulties for us throughout the work, leading us to generate a parallel debate on feminist phenomenology and critical phenomenology. [35]

Regarding the sampling type, we first opted for intensity sampling (FLICK, 2007 [2002]), seeking cases which were experience-rich, not extreme or atypical. However, this criterion also generated discussions in the team, as reflected in the epistemological diary:

"Can we talk about intensities when selecting the sample? Can this be something we establish a priori? I think not. Because it would force us to define *intensities* and it

9 This does not imply changing the research question to *young women in the past*, but rather delving into how the experience of *being young* is configured as a way of being in the world, beyond current age. The central point is not when an experience occurred, but how it was lived and how it continues to mean something in the present for the person narrating it (VAN MANEN, 2014).

10 Personal communication, March 12, 2021.

seems to me a very difficult quality to define, without falling into quantitative data that I do not consider helping define it either. Intensity sampling selects informants who are excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not very unusual cases ... cases that manifest sufficient intensity to illuminate the nature of the phenomenon" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, January 15, 2021). [36]

Faced with this tension, we problematized the possibility of identifying the *intensity* of the phenomenon before listening to the participants. From a phenomenological perspective, we understood that the richness of an experience does not reside in predetermined attributes, but in how it is narrated and lived. Instead of applying an anticipated categorization, we opted for a more situated approach where intensity was revealed in the encounter with the accounts themselves, through their descriptive density, their ability to exemplify the phenomenon, etc. [37]

This reflective process changed our understanding of sampling: We moved from seeking participants who fit a predefined *key informant* profile to focusing on those accounts that, due to their descriptive density, their ability to evoke the lived experience, and their potential to reveal meaning structures, were relevant for understanding the phenomenon. Therefore, instead of prioritizing external attributes or accumulated trajectories, we focused on the experiential and expressive quality of the accounts. [38]

Over time, we realized, as VAN MANEN (1990) suggested, that while *objective* criteria were important, intuition and connection to the lived experience of potential participants were critical in finding potential participants. As discussed by GUETTERMAN (2015), often research samples exceed the needs, creating technical and ethical problems; we understood, following VAN MANEN, that the general aim was to "gather enough experientially rich accounts that make possible the figuration of powerful experiential examples or anecdotes that help to make contact with life as it is lived" (2014, p.353). [39]

Another challenge in selecting participants was our own definition of political participation, set out in methodological challenge 1, which was *that/those activity/ies of the citizen when participating collectively in public affairs seeking the common good*. We encountered difficulties in interpreting the *common good*, generating a new *noise*—as we call in our work the moments of crisis or clash between the *epoché* and our own interpretations—which intensified when considering the hermeneutic (openness) dimension of VAN MANEN's (2014) *epoché-reductio*. While applying this dimension, we felt encouraged to consider multiple interpretations of the *common good*, but we found that some of these interpretations conflicted with our own ethical values.

"We never defined what had to be the *common good* ... what happens if we get a story and the persons explain to us that they manifested to reduce immigration because they consider it negative for a country; that is to say, to demonstrate for a racist action ...? We cannot go there, if they are racists, they are not seeking the common good, because immigrants are part of the common good ... If in their

demonstrations they gather to make other people have a bad time, it does not make sense ... we cannot fall into this relativism. The common good cannot be defined through counter-values" (Researchers' meeting, July 27, 2021). [40]

In this sense, we follow VAN MANEN's (2014) proposal that phenomenology had an intrinsic ethical dimension, which implied a commitment to the understanding of human experience in all its complexity, but also to the promotion of values such as justice and equality. In fact, among the structures of meaning that VAN MANEN (1990) established in phenomenological research was the commitment to maintain a firm pedagogical and ethical relationship with the phenomenon and oriented towards it. [41]

4.4 Methodological Challenge 4. The collection of lived experience descriptions (LEDs)

The collection of lived experience descriptions (LEDs) also posed a great challenge. In fact, we experimented with various data collection techniques, looking for the one that would allow us to access the lived experience of young-women's political participation as faithfully and genuinely as possible. Initially, we opted for descriptive interviews, with the intention of providing a space for reflection and narration of their experiences. However, the interviews, which due to the pandemic situation had to be conducted online, were not satisfactory. The distance and artificiality of the virtual environment made it difficult to connect. Moreover, our intention to access pre-reflective knowledge, as proposed by VAN MANEN (1990), could not be forced through an interview. [42]

Instead, the descriptive accounts and anecdotes which the participants elaborated in writing and with greater freedom, allowed us to access the lived experience of political participation in a more fluid and spontaneous way. Nevertheless, we had to try different ways of asking for the story until we arrived at the one that we felt worked best for us:

"Below we provide you with two instructions on what we are asking you to do. The two slogans refer to the same thing, but we include both to clarify the request as much as possible.

- Describe an experience and/or an anecdote of political participation that you have lived or are living as a young woman.
- What is your lived experience of political participation as a young woman? Can you offer me a story and/or anecdote that you think captures or condenses that experience?

The experiences and/or anecdotes you describe can be written or recorded (whichever is more comfortable for you). The length is free; that is, there is no minimum or maximum. When you write or record it, we ask:

That you focus on an experience of participation. The more vivid the memory you keep or the more important the event, the better. The temporal distance of the experience is not what really matters. The important thing about the story is that it is true to the feeling or impression you have of it.

Describe the experience from the inside: The feelings, moods, emotions, impressions, etc., experienced. Keep in mind that it is not your interpretation of the facts but the facts themselves, as you have lived them.

Look at the concrete and lived experience, both in terms of the body, space, time and interaction with people: for example, the expression on the faces, the words that were said, the atmosphere that seemed to permeate the situation, the sensitive impression of things, words and people. Of primary interest are impressions related to yourself" (Instructions for the base study's participants). [43]

All in all, we collected 20 interviews, stories and anecdotes. However, the volume of material we were ultimately able to use was limited, as only a few allowed us to capture the vivid experience in its pre-reflective mode. Here is an example of the type of data we discarded:

"And then it's clear, yes, yes, that there was this ... this power at the gender level. That it was very pro, because, at the end, a lot of people also came to Can Jaumetó. The other boy had lived in the Basque Country, in Errekaleor, which is also a project for the occupation of a neighborhood in Gasteiz. And a lot of Basques came, ehm, a lot of people, and in the end everybody has their eyes on this man and especially the women, we didn't feel valued. I mean, it wasn't to us that they handed the articles, it wasn't with us that they wanted to debate, you know? So, ehm ... maybe he didn't do it so consciously or not ... he wasn't loved, this adoration towards him, but it was what he generated. And we, in the end, it was like, well ... we were reluctant. You just knew that they came to see him and that was it. That they were the ones missing out in the end. He is as interesting as we are, isn't he? So yes, in these things, there were differences and power roles, well, very different. But, above all, above all, above all, on a political, theoretical level.'

Reflection on the fragment: It does not seem to us a fragment of LED of political participation as a young-woman ... Rather, they are reflections integrated to general facts or, apparently, recurrent, regarding a different treatment—apparently—by gender ... Although, it cannot be ruled out that it is an experience of 'personal charisma' of someone, regardless of their gender ..." (Main researcher's epistemological journal, June 1, 2021). [44]

As we evaluated the material, we clarified the criteria that would define which fragments could be considered *authentic* LEDs within the framework of applied hermeneutic phenomenology (AHP). It was necessary to establish methodological distinctions that would allow us to differentiate between accounts that expressed a concrete and situated lived experience, and those that, although reflective, lacked the experiential density necessary for our analysis. [45]

To select the LEDs that would ultimately be part of the analysis, we applied a series of fundamental methodological criteria (AYALA-CARABAJÓ, 2008, 2016, 2017; FOLGUEIRAS-BERTOMEU, 2021; VAN MANEN, 1990). Firstly, the fragment had to respond, by itself and without relying on the overall context of the accounts, to the research question. Secondly, it had to be a dense description of the experience: Rich in details, situated in time, space, and embodiment,

including what happened, who was present, what was said, and what was felt. This descriptive density enables readers to transport themselves to the lived experience and recognize its plausibility, beyond factual accuracy. Finally, fragments presenting general or abstract interpretations, without direct connection to a concrete, situated, and emotionally embodied experience, were excluded, as exemplified by the excluded fragment we presented. [46]

In addition to these essential requirements, we considered two complementary dimensions: The presence of *existentials* (space, body, time, relationality, lived thing) and the vocative dimension (understood as the expressive potential of the account to evoke in the reader a sense of being moved, challenged, or brought into resonance). Nevertheless, the latter usually manifests more clearly in the later stages of phenomenological writing (FOLGUEIRAS-BERTOMEU, 2021). [47]

However, when applying these criteria, we noted a considerable reduction of the material we were collecting, as not all collected accounts met the required level of density or expressiveness to access the experience in its pre-reflective mode. It was precisely through this selection process that we identified significant concerns within the research team over the amount of data we were working with. [48]

As we understood that we'd be arriving at meaning structures from a reduced number of accounts, we experienced some concern (what we termed *noise*). We questioned whether it would be possible to reach a deep understanding of the phenomenon with only a few descriptions. However, VAN MANEN's (1990) perspective, which prioritizes quality over quantity of descriptions, gave us confidence. The emphasis, according to VAN MANEN, lies in the depth and richness of the experience narrated, not in the number of participants. [49]

Once we completed our work and identified and narrated the meaning structures, we can say that we agree with VAN MANEN. Although the number of descriptions was limited, their richness and depth allowed us to identify and understand the meaning structures of our study phenomenon in greater depth. [50]

4.5 Methodological Challenge 5. Thematic analysis: The challenge of particularity in phenomenological research

A new challenge was to conduct the thematic analysis; specifically, to conduct a thematic analysis that was neither inductive nor deductive but abductive. This methodological challenge focused on how to identify the meaning structures of the phenomenon without nullifying the contextual particularity of the lived experiences. In other words, how to move from the concrete case to the universal without reducing the unique richness of the accounts. As TIMMERMANS and TAVORY (2012) pointed out, abductive analysis should not be understood as an intermediate point between induction and deduction, but as a creative inferential process that allows for the generation of new hypotheses and theoretical understandings from unexpected empirical findings, thus favoring the construction of meaning from the data themselves.

"Following the phenomenology proposed by Van Manen, our study departs from the inductive logic of grounded theory. We do not seek to derive general laws from empirical observation, but to understand the essence of political participation as a young-woman, not as an isolated fact, but as a meaningful lived experience. Van Manen invites us to go beyond *simple particularity and pure universality*. We recognize the influence of context, culture and historical moment in the experience of this phenomenon, but at the same time, we seek to unveil its intrinsic dimensions, those that give it an *intrinsic value* and make it meaningful. That is to say, there would be some ways of manifesting the phenomenon subject to the context, to the culture, to the historical moment. The resource to be used for this is the *hermeneutic circle*. According to this, I wonder: Is the hermeneutic circle also a concentric circle? That is to say, the hermeneutic circle allows us to dialogue between the parts and the whole, between the concrete and the abstract, and concentric circles lead me to imagine the phenomenon in layers" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, February 2, 2021). [51]

We structured the abductive analysis into three interrelated stages:

1. Immersion in the concrete: In this phase we dove deeply into the data collected; that is, the detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences.
2. Isolation of the particular: Once we had identified the data, the significant elements, we proceeded to isolate and analyze them in detail.
3. Emergence of the universal: Through an abductive process, which in this phase of the analysis acquired greater relevance, we identified the fundamental structures of meaning that underlie the individual experiences, thus revealing the essence of the phenomenon and its universal meaning. [52]

Carrying out the three stages required constant reflection and dialogue among and with the data. It should be emphasized that this process was not based on prior analytical categories or external theoretical frameworks but was guided by the emerging meaning structures revealed in the participants' accounts. In other words, the meaning structures we identified emerged from the language, metaphors, etc., that they themselves used when narrating their experiences. This allowed us to remain faithful to the participants' horizon of meaning, in coherence with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. [53]

Throughout the analysis process, the most difficult thing to overcome was the isolation of the particular which is usually the context for qualitative researchers. Our training in qualitative methodology continually clashed with this need to *bracket* the particularities of the context in order to focus on the lived experience. The *noise*—those moments of crisis or clash between the *epoché* and our own interpretations—was constant at this stage. To this end, we resorted to comparisons with other objects of study (eidetic variations) that we knew less well, seeking to *detach* the experience from its specific context and thus access its structures of meaning.

"The particular is always linked to a degree of community. For example, Category. Olive trees. The singular would be a specific olive tree, and the Universal would be trees. The singular, a person with diabetes. The particular, the category diabetes; and the Universal, a disease???" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, October 20, 2020) [54]

This process of *de-contextualization* was particularly complex, as it implied challenging our own habits as qualitative researchers. However, adopting the phenomenological perspective led us to go beyond the search for patterns and regularities in the context to focus on the lived experience and its meaning. It was not about ignoring the context, but about temporarily suspending it to listen to what the experience manifested by itself, from the voice of the participants. [55]

To achieve this *isolation of the particular*, we relied on the *experiential* (concreteness) dimension of VAN MANEN's (2014) *epoché-reductio*. In doing so, we were reminded of the importance of focusing on lived experience in its concreteness and singularity, without getting lost in comparisons or generalizations. At the same time, through the *heuristic* (wonder) dimension we maintained an attitude of openness and curiosity towards the experience, trying not to let our previous knowledge cloud our perception. Also, we were continually brought back to the understanding that the universal is found in the concrete; the universal is not achieved by denying the particular, but by delving into it. [56]

4.6 Transversal challenge. The complexity of a diverse group

A transversal challenge that marked the development of this research was the epistemological diversity within the research team. Due to the size of the team (eight people) and the plurality of trajectories, backgrounds, and theoretical positions, intense debates arose on how to phenomenologically approach the analysis of the experiences we were collecting, while maintaining cohesion and coherence in the process. [57]

After collective deliberation, it was decided that we would divide the work into two distinct methodological spaces as it was assumed that the epistemic frameworks of reference were not compatible within the same analysis process. In the first space, one group focused on applied hermeneutic phenomenological research, following VAN MANEN's approach. The second space, oriented towards feminist phenomenology (FP) and critical phenomenology (CP), was devoted to deepening our understanding of these two approaches. Currently, this second space of FP and CP is discussing the structures of meaning found in our research. [58]

Beyond the epistemological decisions, the composition and functioning of the team also posed a challenge and a source of learning. Although there is no ideal team size, and it is conditioned by many factors, VAN MANEN's emphasis on individual reflection, together with the team's own experience, leads us to consider that a very large team could hinder the deepening of individual reflection and the construction of a meaningful dialogue among researchers. [59]

In this regard, we would like to highlight some qualities of the team that facilitated the progress of the process and the development of a dense and situated research: Reflexivity, writing, humility, curiosity, flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity and methodological rigor. [60]

5. Conclusions

After identifying and discussing our data, we became aware that, without realizing it, we had been conducting reflexive research in line with VAN MANEN's hermeneutic perspective. This exercise of constant reflection allowed us to become aware of our own preconceptions and how these could influence our interpretation of the young-women's experiences. Through dialogue and reflective writing, we were able to identify and question our own structures of consciousness such as the example of sample (mixed or non-mixed) discussed earlier, and how these might be conditioning our understanding of the phenomenon. This process of self-knowledge and construction of a *phenomenological consciousness* has been fundamental to carry out rigorous research committed to the understanding of the lived experience. [61]

In reviewing our epistemological diaries, audios, meetings, etc., we are pleasantly surprised to note the effort made throughout the two and a half years of research to apply objectivity and subjectivity in our process. As reflected in the epistemological diary:

"Today I have been reflecting on objectivity and subjectivity in applied hermeneutic phenomenology (AHP). Sometimes I get a little confused about these concepts, but I think I am getting a better understanding of Van Manen's perspective. I like the idea that objectivity in AHP is not about cold, detached neutrality but about fidelity to the object of study. As Van Manen (2014, p.81) puts it, it is like being a *guardian* of the *authentic nature of the object*. It is a matter of showing it, describing it, interpreting it, but always being faithful to its essence, without allowing ourselves to be deceived or confused by our own preconceived ideas. And subjectivity in AHP is not the opposite of objectivity, but its complement. It is the ability to *penetrate* the object of study, to delve into all its richness, but with *firmness*, as Ayala-Carabajo (2017) says without letting ourselves be sidetracked by our prejudices. I think I am beginning to understand the importance of the balance between objectivity and subjectivity in phenomenological research. It is about being faithful to the phenomenon, but also opening ourselves to it with sensitivity and empathy, to understand it in all its depth" (Main researcher's epistemological journal, April 21, 2021). [62]

In this fragment of the diary, we became aware of the need to balance objectivity and subjectivity in phenomenological research. This balance had become a common thread throughout the whole process, manifesting itself in the different methodological challenges we faced. From the delimitation of the phenomenon to the selection of the participants, etc., we sought to remain faithful to the object of study, while at the same time opening ourselves to the lived experience of the young-women. [63]

Regarding this paper's first specific objective, that is, to identify and describe the specific methodological challenges that arise when applying hermeneutic phenomenology in a study on political participation as a young-woman, section 4 of this paper was elaborated. The first methodological challenge was related to defining the phenomenon of study. Within the framework of phenomenology, this involved suspending preconceptions without emptying the phenomenon of its existential intensity. Other significant challenges emerged in formulating the research question, selecting participants, collecting LEDs, and conducting phenomenological analysis. At each of these stages, the constitutive tension between description and interpretation, as well as between the particular and the universal, became evident. The search for dense and pre-reflective accounts required artisanal work, constant reflexivity, and ethical attention to the phenomenon. [64]

Regarding this paper's second specific objective, that is, to reflect on the implications of the methodological decisions made during the research, the decisions made throughout the research process were not merely technical but deeply epistemic and ethical. For example, the choice to maintain dimensions such as *being a woman* and *being young* as constitutive of the phenomenon implied recognizing that these categories were not external to the act of political participation but structurally and existentially modulated it. Similarly, the use of abductive analysis and the hermeneutic circle enabled a form of understanding that articulates the lived experience with the reflected ones, without falling into pure empiricism or empty abstraction. The tensions experienced with the notion of *common good* or the inclusion criteria for participants also revealed that all phenomenological research requires sustained ethical positioning, where objectivity and subjectivity are understood as complementary dimensions of rigor. [65]

Regarding this paper's third specific objective, that is, to propose recommendations for future research that seeks to apply hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of complex social phenomena based on the lessons learned in this study, some of the recommendations we formulate here have already been noted in the literature (e.g., ALVESSON & SKÖLDBERG, 2017; FINLAY, 2009; VAN MANEN, 1990, 2014), especially regarding the centrality of reflexivity, the ethical nature of the phenomenological approach, or the importance of a situated *epoché*. However, this study aims to contribute not to general theoretical systematization but a concrete and situated implementation of these principles in analyzing complex social phenomena such as young-women's political participation. [66]

Although we started from a theoretical framework that guided our methodological decisions from the outset, the challenges presented here were not defined a priori or organized as pre-existing categories but emerged progressively during the research. This way of proceeding was not due to a lack of planning but responded to the very nature of the phenomenological approach, insofar as we did not seek to impose conceptual structures on the phenomenon but to let it unfold from its own appearance through careful, open, and reflective attention. [67]

The key procedure that allowed us to identify and understand these challenges was methodological meta-reflection. Understood as a critical inquiry into the research process itself (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1994), meta-reflection allowed us to distance ourselves, review our decisions, question our preconceptions, and analyze how methodological tensions were configured in practice. Through reflective writing, epistemological journals, team meetings, and collective analysis, we could name, organize, and make sense of the challenges we faced. [68]

We believe that this way of constructing methodological knowledge—from experience and constant reflexivity—constitutes a relevant contribution in itself. It is not just about applying an approach but showing how hermeneutic phenomenology is lived, adapted, and articulated in an empirical context, with its tensions, limits, and possibilities. [69]

In this sense, the recommendations we propose here are not prescriptive or universal but open proposals that emerge from a situated, reflective, and ethically committed process. From this experience, we suggest:

- Fostering systematic spaces for reflexivity, both individual and collective, through writing, dialogue, and critical analysis of the researcher's own positioning. Besides promoting situated reflexivity during the research development, we consider it important to create moments to distance oneself and reflect on one's reflections: That is, to practice meta-reflection which allows for critically reviewing how these reflections have been constructed, lived, and reformulated throughout the process.
- Adopting a situated *epoché*, consistent with the hermeneutic approach, that allows identifying and problematizing the reference frameworks from which the phenomenon is constructed, identifying the research team's biases, etc. (FOLGUEIRAS-BERTOMEU et al., 2021).
- Prioritizing the experiential quality of LEDs over their quantity, understanding quality as the degree to which an account allows access to the experience as it was lived. From a phenomenological perspective, it is not about accumulating data but about collecting descriptions that, due to their density, expressiveness, and evocative capacity, open a path to the structures of the phenomenon's meaning. When an LED contains that experiential force, the analysis work not only becomes clearer but also almost organically oriented, as the phenomenon begins to reveal itself.
- Recognizing the ethical dimension of the method, considering that phenomenology not only describes experiences but also commits to a way of looking, listening, and caring for the investigated phenomenon. This ethical attitude is expressed both in how the relationship with the phenomenon is built and in the decisions made when narrating, interpreting, and sharing it. In this sense, ethical commitment is not an external dimension to the method but its very foundation.
- Managing the epistemological diversity of research teams rigorously, recognizing that such plurality can enrich the analytical process, provided it is approached from reflective dialogue, epistemic humility, and a clear

methodological delimitation that preserves the internal coherence of the approaches. [70]

These recommendations do not seek to close the debate but to nourish it from a concrete practice, offering an example of how the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology can be activated, questioned, and transformed within the framework of empirical research, and how meta-reflection can be a central strategy in knowledge construction. [71]

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