

Operationalising Descriptive Phenomenology in Management Research to Derive Contextually Relevant Competency Frameworks

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Abstract: Management may be understood as a contextual practice comprising a blend of analysis, experience, insight, and practical wisdom in an environment filled with ambiguity and uncertainty, with no single best way to take action. Much existing work on managerial competence continues to rely on generic competency frameworks; however, such frameworks offer only a partial representation of the practice of management and have limited capacity to capture its contextual and ambiguous character. Such frameworks tend to emphasise stable, clearly demarcated competencies and, in doing so, abstract management from the contexts in which it is practised. This reliance creates a methodological challenge for management research concerned with contextual relevance. Phenomenology provides a means of accessing lived experience and is therefore well suited to the study of management as contextual practice. By focusing on lived experience, phenomenological research enables the examination of management practice as it is meaningfully constituted in everyday organisational contexts. At the same time, phenomenological inquiry introduces substantial analytic and procedural demands, particularly in applied disciplines that require structured and communicable outputs. Concerns commonly cited relate to subjectivity, limited generalisability, and the perceived absence of systematic analytic procedures. As a result, phenomenological approaches remain relatively underutilised in management research. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method offers a systematically articulated analytic approach that remains faithful to phenomenological principles while providing explicit procedural guidance, making phenomenological inquiry more tractable within applied fields such as management research (Giorgi, 1997). Drawing on this approach, the study uses descriptive phenomenology, following Giorgi's human scientific method, to examine managers' lived experience of the contextual practice of management. The study is located within an interpretivist paradigm and focuses on the systematic application of the phenomenological method. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted as open, dialogical engagements to obtain concrete and detailed descriptions grounded in participants' lifeworld. The focus is on methodological design and analytic procedure rather than substantive findings. Practical decisions made during operationalisation are examined, including how accounts of lived experience were translated into discipline-relevant analytic expressions while remaining faithful to phenomenological principles. The analytic procedure involved working with participants' descriptions as they were given, applying phenomenological reduction, identifying meaning units, and transforming these units into discipline-relevant expressions. Through this process, experiential accounts were translated into phenomenologically grounded structural statements that articulate essential aspects of the lived experience of management practice. By providing a transparent account of methodological operationalisation, this paper offers transferable methodological insight for management researchers seeking to work with descriptive phenomenology to produce contextually grounded, discipline-relevant outputs. It demonstrates how Giorgi's human scientific method can be applied systematically within management research to move from lived managerial descriptions to phenomenologically grounded expressions without reducing experience to abstract categories.

Keywords: Managerial Competencies, Descriptive Phenomenology, Giorgi's Human Scientific Method, Management as Contextual Practice

1. Introduction

A substantial body of management scholarship suggests that management may be understood not as a set of universally applicable techniques, but as a contextual practice that unfolds within conditions of ambiguity, uncertainty, and competing demands. In this view, effective management requires a dynamic blend of analysis, experience, insight, and practical wisdom, rather than the application of prescriptive rules or standardised solutions (Mintzberg, 2004; Billsberry and Birnik, 2010). Despite these perspectives, much research on managerial competence continues to rely on generic competency frameworks that abstract management from the contexts in which it is practised. Such frameworks tend to privilege stable, clearly bounded competencies and, in doing so, offer only a partial representation of managerial work as it is experienced in practice.

This reliance on generic frameworks creates a methodological challenge for management research concerned with contextual relevance. While competency lists may be useful for classification and comparison, they have limited capacity to capture the fluid, relational, and situational nature of managerial practice. As Anosike et al. (2012) note, the relationship between management theory and management practice can be challenging to

examine using predominantly positivistic research paradigms, which prioritise measurement, generalisability, and causal explanation.

In response to these limitations, this study adopts a phenomenological perspective, which provides access to managers' lived experiences and explores management as it is enacted in context. Phenomenology was selected as it is well suited to investigating certain experiential and lived dimensions of managerial competence that remain underrepresented in dominant competency-based approaches (Finlay, 2009). By foregrounding lived experience, this paper contributes to ongoing methodological discussions about how contextually grounded insights into management practice can be generated and analytically represented. Phenomenology is presented as one way of examining lived, contextually embedded aspects of managerial practice.

The purpose of this paper is therefore methodological rather than substantive. It provides a transparent account of the analytic procedures used in a descriptive phenomenological study, following Giorgi's human scientific approach, to examine managers' lived experience of contextual practice. The focus is on analytical procedure and the translation of lived experience into phenomenologically grounded expressions that are typical and relevant to management scholarship within an applied research context.

Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method is adopted because it offers a systematically articulated analytic framework that remains grounded in Husserlian phenomenology, while also providing explicit procedural guidance suitable for human scientific inquiry. Unlike more interpretive or hermeneutic variants, Giorgi's approach emphasises disciplined description, eidetic analysis, and methodological transparency, thereby offering a viable bridge between philosophical phenomenology and applied management research.

The next section positions management as contextual practice within the literature establishing the theoretical foundations for a phenomenology approach. This is followed by an outline of descriptive phenomenology and Giorgi's methodological framework. The research design and analytic procedure are then detailed, with particular emphasis on analytical translation. The article concludes with methodological reflections and implications for management researchers working in applied contexts.

2. Research Paradigm and Theoretical Positioning

This study is located within the interpretivist research paradigm, which views social reality as meaningfully constructed through human experience rather than as an objective phenomenon that can be observed independently of those who enact it (Saunders et al., 2019). In contrast to positivist approaches that prioritise measurement and prediction, interpretivism seeks to develop rich understanding of phenomena as they are experienced and interpreted by social actors within specific contexts. This orientation is particularly relevant to the study of management, which unfolds in environments characterised by complexity, ambiguity, and change.

The theoretical roots of interpretivism can be traced to the work of Weber and Schutz, who sought to establish an objective science of the subjective by analysing the meanings that constitute the social world (Blaikie, 2011). Schutz's emphasis on the constitutive role of everyday experience provides a foundation for phenomenology, which takes lived experience as its primary point of departure. From this perspective, management practice can be understood as emerging through managers' interpretations of situations, responsibilities, and relationships as they are meaningfully established in everyday organisational life. Given the study's focus on management as contextual practice, an interpretivist paradigm is therefore appropriate. It provides a philosophical foundation for descriptive phenomenology, enabling the systematic examination of managers' lived experiences while remaining attentive to scientific rigour and contextual meaning.

3. Literature Review

Building on the view of management as a contextual practice, the literature increasingly challenges positivist assumptions that managerial work can be captured through standardised models, prescriptive techniques, or generic competency frameworks. As Mintzberg (2004) and Billsberry and Birnik (2010) argue, management unfolds in environments marked by ambiguity, uncertainty, and competing social and organisational demands, requiring judgement, sense-making, and practical wisdom rather than the application of universal rules. Understanding management therefore requires recognising that realities and identities are constituted relationally through everyday interaction, rather than existing as objective structures independent of practice (Cunliffe, 2004). This has prompted scholarly interest in methods that engage more directly with managers' lived experience.

Research concerned with understanding complex phenomena often requires engagement with the experiences of others in order to generate meaningful insight (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Phenomenology offers one such approach by providing a systematic means of examining lived experience and the structures of meaning through which phenomena present themselves in everyday practice (Giorgi, 2005; Neubauer et al., 2019). Rooted in an epistemological concern with consciousness and meaning, phenomenology focuses on how phenomena are experienced rather than explaining them through external causal mechanisms. In phenomenological terms, a phenomenon is that which presents itself to consciousness in experience (Shudak, 2018). As Giorgi (1997) explains, phenomenology refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to a person, offering access to the meaning structures that underpin human action.

3.1 Phenomenological Philosophy: From Husserl to Contemporary Methodologies

The philosophical foundations of phenomenology are often traced to the work of Franz Brentano (1838–1917), whose descriptive psychology foregrounded consciousness and intentionality as central to human experience and influenced the development of phenomenology (Shudak, 2018). Phenomenology was subsequently established as a systematic philosophical project by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), at a time when positivism dominated the philosophy of science (Dörfler and Stierand, 2021).

Central to Husserl's philosophy is the concept of intentionality: the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something. Experience is therefore relational, involving both the act of consciousness (noesis) and the object as it appears (noema) (Husserl, 1913/1983; Eberle, 2013). This insight provides a foundation for phenomenological research, as meaning is understood to be constituted through lived experience rather than imposed by theoretical categories.

Husserl's phenomenological method is typically described as involving phenomenological reduction, description, and the search for essences. Through reduction, the researcher suspends the natural attitude, that is, taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, to consider how the phenomenon is given in experience. This suspension, referred to as epoché or bracketing, does not deny the existence of the world, but places assumptions temporarily out of play to allow the phenomenon to be described as it appears (Giorgi, 1997). Description seeks to articulate the phenomenon without recourse to explanation or theory-building. Through eidetic reduction and imaginative variation, the researcher identifies the essential meaning structures that constitute the phenomenon across variations of experience.

3.2 Descriptive Phenomenology and its Contribution to Organisational Research

Within organisational and management research, phenomenology has been recognised for its capacity to describe taken-for-granted practices, relational dynamics and aspects of experience that can be obscured by positivist methodologies (Gill, 2014).

By focusing on lived experience, phenomenological research enables examination of management practice as it is meaningfully constituted in everyday organisational contexts, offering insights that are both contextually grounded and meaningful to practitioners (Anosike et al., 2012).

Despite its potential, phenomenology remains underutilised in management research. Concerns commonly cited relate to subjectivity, limited generalisability, and the perceived absence of systematic analytic procedures (Finlay, 2009; Anosike et al., 2012). In applied disciplines such as management, there is often a tension between the philosophical depth of phenomenology and the demand for structured, communicable outputs that can inform practice.

Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method addresses some of these concerns by providing a systematically articulated analytic procedure grounded in Husserlian principles, while maintaining methodological transparency. The approach emphasises disciplined description, systematic reduction, and the transformation of everyday experiential accounts into phenomenologically grounded, discipline-relevant expressions. Importantly, this process moves from concrete descriptions to general meaning structures that are typical rather than universal, rather than hermeneutically interpreting experience (Giorgi, 2007).

The literature on managerial competencies highlights a gap that descriptive phenomenology is well positioned to address. Existing competency frameworks tend to include decontextualised attributes and measurable behaviours, offering limited insight into how competencies are experienced, enacted, and interrelated in practice. Ruth (2006) and Datar et al. (2011) note that such frameworks struggle to capture the contextual,

relational, and often paradoxical nature of managerial work. In response, scholars such as Nkomo (2015) have called for research approaches that engage more directly with managers' lived experiences, particularly in contexts characterised by social and organisational complexity.

The literature highlights both the promise and the methodological demands of applying descriptive phenomenology within management research. The effective application of phenomenology requires alignment between the research question, philosophical positioning, and methodological approach (Neubauer et al., 2019). These considerations inform the design of the present study, which seeks to work systematically with managers' lived experience while maintaining phenomenological rigour. The following section therefore outlines how this methodological approach was applied

4. Methodology

Building on the methodological foundations discussed in the literature, this study employed Giorgi's human scientific approach to descriptive phenomenology to examine managers' lived experience of management as contextual practice, recognising that engagement with such experience enables the generation of contextually grounded insight. The descriptive phenomenological method represents a methodology that is consistent with its phenomenological foundations (Englander and Morley, 2023).

The focus of the methodological design was to ensure a systematic and rigorous application of the phenomenological method, enabling the translation of experiential accounts into phenomenologically grounded, discipline-relevant expressions. In line with Giorgi's principles, the analytic procedure involved working with participants' descriptions as they were given, applying phenomenological reduction, identifying meaning units, and transforming these units into general structural descriptions. The emphasis throughout remained on disciplined description rather than interpretation, ensuring alignment with the principles of descriptive phenomenology. This section therefore provides a transparent account of the procedures followed, including the practical decisions involved in operationalising the method for applied management research.

Giorgi's approach is adopted because it offers explicit procedural guidance while retaining fidelity to phenomenological commitments. It enables the generation of findings that are both phenomenologically grounded and communicable within applied management research.

4.1 Participants

The empirical material analysed through the methodological lens presented here was generated through a phenomenological study involving 20 practising managers. These managers were selected to reflect a group occupying senior to executive roles, enabling access to rich descriptions of the contextual practice of management in South Africa. Participants operated across multiple industries and sectors. The average management experience of participants was 20 years.

4.2 Data Collection

In phenomenological research, the data collection process is shaped by the nature of the phenomenon itself, with the design required to fit the phenomenon rather than impose a predefined structure (Englander and Morley, 2023). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted as open, dialogical engagements informed by phenomenological principles, enabling participants to provide concrete and detailed descriptions of their lived experience of management practice in South Africa. In line with Giorgi's (1997) recommendation that questions remain broad and open-ended, the primary question invited participants to describe their experience of managing, namely: "What is it like to manage/be a manager in South Africa?" Follow-up prompts were used to guide participants toward detailed accounts of day-to-day experience rather than general opinion.

The focus of phenomenological inquiry is on experience as concretely lived in particular situations, rather than abstracted from context (Englander and Morley, 2023). The aim was therefore to obtain descriptions grounded in the participants' lifeworld and expressed from the "everyday attitude" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 243), using terminology familiar to them (Benner, 1994). Consistent with phenomenological principles, the researcher adopted an attitude of openness and deliberate naïveté (Bevan, 2014; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), remaining receptive and withholding prior assumptions to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself as experienced (Gibson and Hanes, 2003). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and securely stored for each participant. These descriptions constituted the data from which the essential meaning structures of the experience were subsequently derived (Giorgi, 1997).

4.3 Analytic Procedure

The analytic procedure is presented not only to document the steps followed, but to demonstrate how methodological choices were made to remain aligned to descriptive phenomenological principles while producing discipline-relevant expressions.

The operationalisation of Giorgi's method in this study followed the systematic steps articulated by Giorgi (1997; 2005; 2007), summarised in Figure 1.

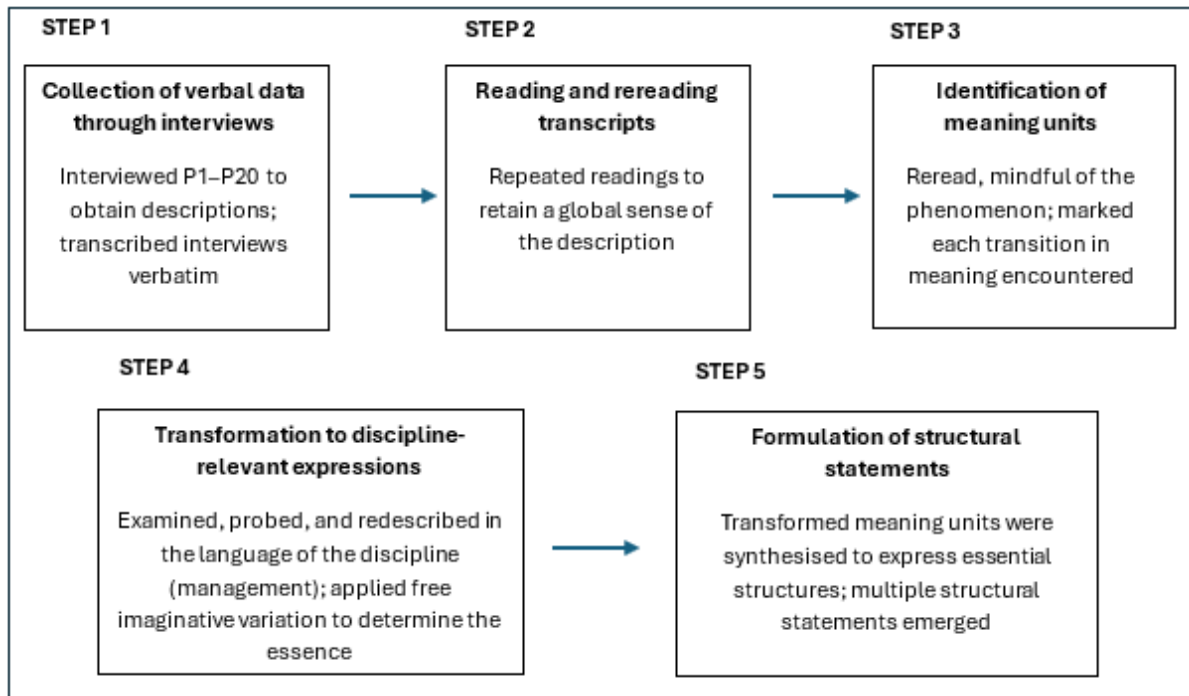


Figure 1: Operationalising Giorgi's method (1997) in this study

4.3.1 Step 1: Reading and Rereading

The process began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to retain a global sense of the description and not to attempt any thematisation (Giorgi, 1997). The participants generally gave several shorter descriptions, based on their everyday management experiences. Each participant's descriptions were organised in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, saved with the relevant participant number (P1–P20). The first worksheet of each spreadsheet contained the full text of the descriptions.

4.3.2 Step 2: Identification of Meaning Units

Since phenomenology is concerned with meanings, the next step is to identify meaning units, defined as shifts in meaning that occur naturally in the participant's description. Meaning units are assigned by rereading the text, mindful of the phenomenon being researched, and marking each transition in meaning, to enable a systematic engagement with shifts in meaning while remaining grounded in the participant's description. Meaning units must be small enough to be manageable, but large enough to have an explorable significance (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). The result is a series of meaning units, still expressed in the language of the participant. Giorgi (2012) explains that meaning units carry no theoretical weight and different researchers will have different meaning units. Each meaning unit was placed in a new row in another column of the participant's worksheet. The first column was used to number the specific meaning unit (e.g., P1.1.1, referring to Participant 1, first description, first meaning unit).

4.3.3 Step 3: Transformation Into Discipline-Relevant Expressions

The next step involves the organisation and expression of data in the language of the discipline. At this stage, the meaning units are "examined, probed and redescribed so the disciplinary value of each unit can be made more explicit" (Giorgi, 1997). Meaning units were transformed into expressions articulated in the language of

the discipline, here, management, while remaining faithful to the phenomenological content. The participant's everyday language is reformulated through the researcher's disciplinary insight to ensure that the transformed expressions remain grounded in lived experience and analytically meaningful within managerial scholarship, without compromising phenomenological description (Gill, 2014). A process of free imaginative variation is then applied to discern the essence of the experience.

4.3.4 Step 4: Formulation of Structural Statements

In the final step, the transformed meaning units are synthesised to formulate structural statements, which express the essential constituents of the phenomenon across participants. Structural statements are phenomenologically grounded articulations of meaning that capture invariant features of lived experience (Giorgi, 2005). While the aim is generally to derive one structural statement, this is not a requirement, and data should not be forced into a single structure (Giorgi, 1997); multiple structural statements may emerge.

Practically, the transformed meaning units were gathered from the 20 participant spreadsheets and organised into competency themes in a single document, with the numbering of each unit retained, and read and rearranged as necessary. Finally, the meaning units were integrated into structural statements following Giorgi's guidelines (2007). The process of free imaginative variation was applied to extract the essence of the practice of contextual management.

5. Findings

The phenomenological analysis yielded 37 structural statements, each articulating an essential element of the lived experience of management as contextual practice in the form of a competency description. These statements were derived through the systematic application of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method and represent discipline-relevant transformations of participants' descriptions. Based on the research aim of uncovering the contextually relevant managerial competencies, the structural statements were organised in the form of competency descriptions. The structural statements articulate invariant features of the phenomenon as experienced by senior managers. They express typical aspects of contextual managerial practice and reflect the essential structures without which the experience would be inconceivable.

To illustrate the nature of the phenomenologically derived structural statements, one example, for the competency of *Equanimity*, is presented below (Venter, 2024, p. 152):

"Equanimity refers to the manager's ability to remain calm and composed in the face of challenging circumstances, chaos or crisis. Managers with equanimity do not pass on the stress of the situation to their staff, making them approachable and effective in handling serious challenges. Managers who practise equanimity are aware of the deconstructive impact that critical language can have, when used both by themselves and by others. It is a constructive approach to handling challenges, requiring stillness of the mind and discipline on the part of the manager to remain composed amid the noise of the environment. Equanimity allows the manager to show restraint under pressure and to encourage team members to be disciplined in the manner they engage."

This statement illustrates how participants' descriptions were transformed into discipline-relevant expressions while remaining faithful to the lived experience of the phenomenon. The articulation captures essential constituents of the experience rather than behavioural indicators or performance criteria. The remaining structural statements formulated in the study follow a similar form, each expressing a distinct but interrelated constituent of contextual managerial practice as a competency.

5.1 Overview of Competencies

For organisational clarity, the structural competency statements were arranged across three levels as follows:

- *Self* (10) - related to the manager's internal orientation, including dispositions, values, and existential stance toward ambiguity and responsibility.
- *Others* (13) - relational competencies emerging from managers' engagement with colleagues, teams, and stakeholders.
- *World of Work* (14) - associated with organisational, strategic, and contextual demands, including those specific to the South African environment

These levels emerged from participants' descriptions of the phenomenon of management and reflect different but related aspects of managerial engagement in context. The Self level captures the internal orientation of the manager, while the levels of Others and the World of Work reflect engagement in relational and organisational contexts (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Conceptual representation of the interrelated levels of competencies in the contextual practice of management, showing Self (internal orientation), Others (relational engagement), and the World of Work (organisational and contextual environment).

While analytically distinguished, these levels are not discrete domains. The levels reflect distinct but interrelated layers of managerial engagement emerging from the analysis. The competencies are derived as structural statements and represent essential aspects of the lived experience of management. The categorisation into levels provides an organising structure rather than fixed boundaries. Competencies are experienced as interrelated and, in some cases, contain elements of different levels, with placement reflecting where the strongest links exist.

The structural statements indicate that competencies are experienced as interdependent and dynamically connected within lived managerial practice, reflecting the interplay of different elements that result in managerial behaviour, with the Self level exerting a mediating influence across the other levels.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

The discussion that follows focuses on the methodological implications of applying Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method in this study, with particular attention to the rationale for key analytic choices within an applied management context.

6.1 Description Versus Opinion

A central methodological concern in this study was the distinction between lived description and evaluative opinion. In a management context, participants are often accustomed to speaking in broad, strategic, or normative terms. Descriptive phenomenology, however, requires attention to concrete experience rather than general statements. The interview process therefore required continual guidance, with prompts redirecting participants from abstract commentary to specific experiences of being a manager.

This highlights a practical challenge when applying phenomenology in applied fields. Professionals tend to draw on the conceptual language of their discipline when speaking about their work. The researcher must therefore remain attentive during data generation to ensure accounts remain grounded in experience rather than professional discourse. Without this focus, analysis may shift toward organising opinions thematically rather than articulating the structural meaning of lived experience.

6.2 Operationalising Essence in Management Language

A second methodological issue concerned the translation of phenomenologically derived structures into the language of management competencies. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to articulate essential constituents of experience, while competency language often refers to behavioural indicators or measurable traits. The

transformation process therefore required careful judgement to ensure that structural meanings were not reduced to performance descriptions.

Free imaginative variation supported the identification of indispensable aspects of the experience, allowing constituents to be included based on necessity rather than frequency. In descriptive phenomenology, inclusion rests on indispensability rather than numerical repetition. For management researchers, this means grounding analytic decisions in structural coherence rather than frequency.

6.3 Structural Statements

The decision not to collapse the analysis into a single unified statement, but to retain multiple interrelated articulations, reflects the complexity of contextual managerial practice. In management research, phenomenological outputs may therefore resist consolidation, particularly where the phenomenon is multidimensional. Clear explanation of analytic decisions helps maintain phenomenological integrity while presenting findings accessibly.

7. Conclusion

Giorgi's human scientific method provided a systematically articulated framework through which managers' lived descriptions could be transformed into discipline-relevant expressions. The operationalisation undertaken in this study demonstrates that descriptive phenomenology can be applied rigorously within management research, provided that careful attention is given to the distinction between description and interpretation and the discernment of essence.

These considerations indicate that descriptive phenomenology can be effectively applied in management research when three methodological commitments are upheld:

- Maintaining a disciplined focus on participants' descriptions of their experiences;
- Articulating the essential aspects of the experience without relying on frequency as a marker of significance; and
- Remaining critically aware of how disciplinary language and representational choices influence the analytic process.

By making these operational decisions explicit, this study provides a transparent and systematic account of how descriptive phenomenology was operationalised and offers methodological guidance for management researchers applying phenomenology in research contexts. It shows how Giorgi's human scientific method can move from lived managerial descriptions to phenomenologically grounded and discipline-relevant expressions without reducing experience to abstract categories.

In doing so, the study demonstrates how descriptive phenomenology can be applied in a methodologically rigorous and contextually sensitive manner within management research.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Stellenbosch Business School Departmental Ethics Screening Committee under reference number 14876825, on 1 July 2019.

AI Declaration

Microsoft Copilot was used in a secure institutional environment to assist with language refinement, reducing word count and formatting references. All conceptual development, methodological design, analysis, and substantive content are the sole work of the authors.

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