

Developing a Phenomenological Social Work Reduction

Mary Beth Morrissey

Law and Social Work

Fordham University

Social work research has turned to phenomenological methods in the study of social problems in the human sciences, especially in the field of gerontological social work. In a recent study of suffering and medical decision making among frail elderly women, the orientation of the phenomenological psychological reduction to the perspective of the social work professional in understanding the complexities and structures of experience in the life-worlds of frail elderly women suggests certain disciplinary limitations. An objective of this paper is to address the task of developing a phenomenological social work reduction that addresses a problem of knowledge in social work, a task that heretofore has not been undertaken in any systematic fashion in phenomenological research. The history of the 20th century qualitative revolution in the social sciences positioned the discipline of psychology to steer the development of phenomenological research methods. The phenomenological psychological reduction, therefore, is founded upon a distinctly psychological perspective that is a condition precedent to description of the structures of lived experience and the invariant meaning of phenomena. While the disciplines and perspectives of psychology and social work remain closely allied in many respects, social work professional practice has its own identity and perspective that ought to inform the phenomenological reduction in order to make available appropriate social service provisions to support individuals and families in their various environments. The drive for social work professionalization has created a struggle within the profession as to the goals of social service. The strengths-based perspective of social work and the central role of social systems in an ecological framework are among the multiple factors that need to be weighed in examining the field. This paper will explore the constituents of a phenomenological social work reduction, the ecology of social work, and conflicts within the profession that threaten the ecological validity of the life-world encounter from the professional gaze of the social worker.